ANGLO-AMERICAN RELATIONS AND THE VIETNAM WAR, 1964-8

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ABSTRACT

Anglo-American Relations and the Vietnam War, 1964-68

It is over thirty years since the U.S. became embroiled in the Vietnam war. Only recently, however, have scholars begun to assess how that involvement in South East Asia affected America's relations with other countries. This thesis examines the impact of the Vietnam war on the relationship between the United States and one of its key allies, Great Britain, during the height of the conflict. It assesses how far Vietnam was a factor in the cooling of transatlantic relations during the mid to late 1960s.

Scholars have long noted the decline in importance of Anglo-American relations during the 1960s. It is the contention of this thesis that the Johnson administration's preoccupation with events in South East Asia made the inevitable loosening of ties between the two countries strained and uncomfortable. Although it was not the only problematic issue troubling Anglo-American relations during this period, Vietnam was the one area where there was clear and open conflict. Whereas tensions over sterling and the decision by the British Government to remove its troops from East of Suez prompted feelings of disappointment, sadness and frustration, Vietnam provoked disagreement, misunderstandings, annoyance and accusations of betrayal.

At the beginning of their period in office, the British Labour Government desired a 'closer' relationship with the United States but by 1968 it was apparent that the Johnson Administration was not amenable to this. This was partly because Britain was now, just one of a number of close allies in Europe; partly because the

American President did not develop a personal friendship with the British Prime Minister; but also because the Vietnam conflict had proved an issue - important enough and emotive enough - to cause open and deep disagreement between the two countries.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis will examine three major themes. Firstly, it seeks to further understanding of the Vietnam War by focussing on the bilateral relationship between the United States of America and one of its close allies, the United Kingdom, during the key years of the war. Over the last decade, many scholars of American foreign relations have recognised the need to adopt an international perspective in their studies.[1] The New Diplomatic History has promised to make redundant the criticism that the history of American Foreign Relations is too parochial and instead 'seeks to write a global American History'.[2] As Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman recently pointed out, this new paradigm 'shows the United States as an incredibly powerful participant in a world that is nonetheless not easily malleable to its touch'.[3] A study of Anglo-American relations during the Vietnam War highlights America's difficulties in persuading Great Britain to cooperate on this issue. As such, this monograph will continue the process of providing a broader context to the study of the war in particular, and of American foreign relations in general.

The Vietnam War has attracted much scholarly attention. However, most of the scholarship on the decision-making process has been based largely on American sources and concentrated primarily on American domestic considerations, particularly President Johnson's plans for a 'Great Society'. Relatively little attention has been paid to the international environment in which the United States made its decisions, or to the impact of its policies on the wider world. Yet external

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[1] Michael J. Hogan, 'State of the Art: An Introduction' in Michael J. Hogan (Ed.), *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations since 1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

[2] Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, 'Diplomatic History and the Meaning of Life: Towards a Global American History', *Diplomatic History,* Vol. 21, No.4 (Fall 1997), p. 500

[3] Ibid

factors as well as internal ones clearly shaped American policy on Vietnam. Despite its weakening economic and military position, Britain was still an important and respected actor on the world scene; even President Johnson referred to the country, however disingenuously at times, as America's most important ally. The American public agreed with their President's assessment. A Gallup Opinion Poll of March 1965 found that Britain was judged the US' most reliable ally and ranked it as the fourth most important country in the world after the United States, the USSR and China.[4] This study will assess the extent to which the Johnson administration's increasing preoccupation with events in South East Asia affected its conduct of foreign affairs in relation to one of its key European allies.

It is in this context that one must examine Clive Ponting's claim in *Breach of Promise* that 1965 saw President Johnson and Harold Wilson negotiate a series of 'understandings' which tied American financial support to a British commitment not to devalue the pound and to retain a military presence East of Suez. This claim is now widely supported by scholars in the field.[5] Ponting also claimed that by the spring of 1965 Wilson and Johnson had come to a 'general understanding' on the part the UK should play in Vietnam. The British would provide no direct assistance to the United States but would support American action in Vietnam; the Americans committed themselves to keeping their transatlantic ally well-informed of their policy in Vietnam and 'reluctantly accepted' that Britain should use its role as Co-Chair of

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[4] C.J. Bartlett, *'The Special Relationship': A Political History in Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 109

[5] Clive Ponting, *Breach of Promise: Labour in Power 1964-1970* (London: Penguin, 1990). Ponting's views are supported by scholars of Anglo-American relations, and the Labour government, such as Alan P. Dobson, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1995); C.J. Bartlett, *The Special Relationship: A Political History of Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (London: Longman, 1992); Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London: HarperCollins, 1992); Philip Zeigler. *Wilson: The Authorized Life of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993); John Dumbrell, 'The Johnson Administration and the British Labour Government: Vietnam, The Pound and East of Suez,' *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 30, Pt. 2 (August 1996).

the 1954 Geneva Conference to seek peace.[6] This thesis will show how and why Wilson and Johnson came to this agreement; moreover it will consider what part Vietnam played in the later controversial understanding that linked American support for sterling with the maintenance of Britain's worldwide role. This idea of a understanding was, in one form or another, in common circulation at the time.[7] Some Labour members, especially Foreign Secretary George Brown, believed Wilson came to some sort of an agreement with Johnson during his December 1964 visit to Washington. Barbara Castle records in her diary that Brown, not too drunk, complained that:

> 'We've got to break with America, devalue and go into Europe' but 'He [Wilson] can't budge ... Because he is too deeply committed to Johnson. God knows what he said to him. Back in 1964 he stopped me going to Washington. He went himself. What did he pledge? I don't know: that we wouldn't devalue and full support in the Far East? But both those have got to go. We've got to turn down their money and pull out the troops: all of them ... I want them out of East of Suez. This is the decision we have got to make: break the commitment to America. I've been sickened by what I've had to do to defend America at the dispatch box.'[8]

In fact, as this thesis will demonstrate, in many respects Ponting's use of the word 'understanding' to describe Anglo-American policymaking on these crucial areas seems more apposite than Brown's evocation of shady bargains. Castle herself now doubts that Wilson made any specific deal, believing 'Harold wasn't Machiavellian in the way of sitting down and working out little deals ... with people'.[9] In his

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6 Ponting, *Breach of Promise*, p. 148

7 See also P. Toynbee, 'Dictators, Demagogues or Prigs?', *New Statesman*, 5 January 1965 in Kingsley Amis (Ed.), *Harold's Years: Impressions from the New Statesman and the Spectator* (London: Quartet Books, 1977), p. 57; *New Statesman*, 12 March 1965, 'Vietnam - What's Wilson Waiting For?'

8 Barbara Castle, *The Barbara Castle Diaries 1964-76* (London: Papermac, 1990), 18 July 1966, p. 76

9 Interview with author, 28 April 1993

memoirs, James Callaghan, Chancellor of the Exchequer during the Wilson years, also vehemently denies any deal involving Vietnam. 'Emphatically I must record that I encountered nothing said or implied to this effect.'[10] And yet, while it is extremely unlikely that any formal deals were made between Wilson and the Americans, this does not mean to say that the Prime Minister was not aware of American thinking on the issue, as we shall see, he repeatedly made statements, initiatives, and decisions with regard to Vietnam in the expectation of certain responses from America toward Britain and her interests. As Castle notes, Wilson 'would have a kind of understanding and it would be unwritten and almost unarticulated ... done by instinctive reactions'.[11] Wilson himself later recognised that in one sense the U.K.'s hands were tied over Vietnam. Richard Crossman points out in his diaries how Wilson contradicted himself on this issue at a Cabinet meeting on defence in February 1966:

> First he repeated time after time that the Americans had never made any connection between the financial support they gave us and our support for them in Vietnam. Then about ten minutes later he was saying, 'Nevertheless, don't let's fail to realize that their financial support is not unrelated to the way we behave in the Far East: any direct announcement of our withdrawal [from East of Suez] ... could not fail to have a profound effect on my personal relations with L.B.J. and the way the Americans treat us.[12]

That Vietnam dominated US foreign policy during the Johnson years is without question. George Ball, US under Secretary of State, famously admitted that Vietnam 'made it very hard to get attention on anything else, that judgements tended

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10 James Callaghan, *Time and Chance* (London: Collins, 1987), p. 176

11 Interview with author, 28 April 1993

12 Richard Crossman, *Crossman Diaries: Selections from the Diaries of a Cabinet Minister 1964-70* (London: Mandarin, 1991), 14 February 1966, p. 180

to be colored by the Vietnamese situation ... we were getting things totally distorted ... In fact, I once drew a map for Dean Rusk and said, "this is your map of the world." I had a tiny United States with an enormous Vietnam lying right off the coast.' As an example of this Ball mentioned that the Johnson administration 'pressed the British so hard to stay in line on Vietnam' that 'I'm sure we were willing to pay some costs for it we wouldn't have paid otherwise'.[13] The need for allied support in its Vietnam crusade was extremely important to the United States and this work will consider how far its leaders put pressure on the United Kingdom to remain loyal on Vietnam, in addition to explaining why the British Labour Government could not comply with all of America's demands.

Due to the British thirty-year rule, historical assessments of the effects of the Vietnam war on Anglo-American relations have until recently been constrained by the dearth of authoritative sources. As a result, most analysis of Britain and the Vietnam war has been found within the context of broader studies of the Anglo-American relationship or the Vietnam War. To date, the only major examination of this issue is Caroline Page's doctoral thesis 'The Strategic Manipulation of American Official Propaganda during the Vietnam War, 1965-6 and British Opinion on the War'.[14] Based largely on unofficial sources and examining a very brief time-span, Page's study focussed mainly on the efficacy of American propaganda in retaining the support of the British press, public and government. More recently John Dumbrell's article 'The Johnson Administration and the British Labour Government:

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[13] Transcript, George Ball Oral History Interview, Interview II, Tape 1, 9 July 1971 by Paige E. Mulhollan, p. 17, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, Austin, Texax [henceforth LBJL]

[14] Caroline Page, 'The Strategic Manipulation of American Official Propaganda during the Vietnam War, 1965-1966, and British Opinion on the War,' PhD Dissertation, University of Reading, 1989. Caroline Page, *US Propaganda During the Vietnam War, 1965-73: The Limits of Persuasion* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1994)

Vietnam, The Pound and East of Suez' has examined Anglo-American relations from the American viewpoint.[15] The main object of this study, then, is to provide a detailed account of the Vietnam war's impact on the transatlantic relationship.

The second aim of this thesis is to shed light on the 'special relationship' during what was undoubtedly a difficult period for both countries. The United States faced domestic and international criticism of its war in Vietnam, at the same time as the country was riven with racial and other social unrest. If, as Ernest May and Gregory Treverton have claimed, the 'special relationship' amounts to 'a sense of company in a confusing, unfriendly world' then America clearly needed all the friends it could get during one of its most troubled periods.[16] Equally, Great Britain faced major economic turmoil and a concomitant readjustment in its world role; so it too needed all the help it could get. Unlike most studies of Anglo-American relations this thesis does not primarily examine the inequality of power between the nations, although much of the debate over Vietnam was predicated on the knowledge of this fact. Instead, it focusses on how quite serious disagreements between Great Britain and the United States over Vietnam were handled, and to some extent accommodated within the framework of the 'Special, if unequal, Relationship'.

Although case studies have focussed on short-term crises such as Suez, the Skybolt affair and the Falklands war, a study of Anglo-American relations and the Vietnam War affords an opportunity to study how the relationship coped with a prolonged period of tension.[17] Richard Neustadt argued convincingly in *Alliance*

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[15] Dumbrell, 'The Johnson Administration and the British Labour Government'. See also John Dumbrell, *The Making of US Foreign Policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990.

[16] Ernest R. May and Gregory F. Treverton, 'Defence Relationships: Americans Perspectives' in William Roger Louis and Hedley Bull (Eds.), *The Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (London: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 181

[17] Richard Neustadt, *Alliance Politics* (London: Columbia University Press, 1970); Louise Richardson, *When Allies Differ: Anglo-American Relations During the Suez and Falklands Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996). The 1956

Politics that misunderstandings are much more likely between countries with an intimate and close relationship. Differences are magnified because more is expected of the respective allies. Nowhere is this more apparent than during the Vietnam War. The US expected, indeed almost demanded, loyalty and support from Britain on Vietnam. However, a brief consideration of the history of Anglo-American relations in Asia should have made the leadership in Washington well aware that Britain was unlikely to 'toe the line' in this area, while a cursory examination of British domestic politics would have indicated that there would be definite limits to the Labour Government's support for US actions in Vietnam. But an analysis of Anglo-American relations and Vietnam in the mid 1960s shows that the White House and the State Department seemed to be operating a practice of 'doublethink' where Britain and Vietnam was concerned. Although they acknowledged the reasons why the Wilson government could not commit troops to Vietnam, this did not overcome Washington's gut-feeling that the British weren't doing enough on the issue. The rhetoric and reality of the 'special relationship' was at the root of this confusion in Washington and in London, for it is quite clear that the British government was also torn on how to behave 'correctly' - according to conflicting criteria - regarding Vietnam.

Thirdly, the thesis explores the relationship between personality and politics. It has long been considered a truism to state that relations between Harold Wilson and Lyndon Johnson were not merely cool, but positively icy, especially when compared with the image of warm intimacy associated with John Kennedy and

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crisis over Suez was by far the most serious in terms of the international consequences; Skybolt was very much an intra-alliance crisis; and disagreements over the Falklands showed how the interests of Britain, the weaker power, conflicted with the interests of the stronger. However, in between the Skybolt crisis of 1962 and the Falklands crisis of 1982 was another important area of conflict: the Vietnam War.

Harold Macmillan.[18] A great deal has been written about the part played by personal relationships in the smooth functioning of the 'special relationship' and while there is agreement amongst scholars that Anglo-American relations are, first and foremost, interest-led, there is still a lack of unanimity on the part played by personal chemistry.[19] It is generally acknowledged that a warm personal relationship between the leaders of Britain and America provides excellent public relations material for both the countries and the individual statesmen involved; and can foster a more co-operative, working environment. The extent to which personal relations influence policy-making is much less certain. It is hard to deny, however, the personal significance of the Vietnam War to President Lyndon Baines Johnson and many of his key advisors. For that reason, it has to be asked if LBJ's obsession with Vietnam, mixed with his already volatile personality, decisively influenced US relations with Great Britain. On the other side of the Atlantic, was Harold Wilson so impressed by, and fearful of, LBJ as a world leader and personality, that his judgement was impaired on the issue of Vietnam?

The major sources of materials for the thesis were the Public Record Office, Kew (PRO) and the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJL) in Austin, Texas.[20] Many files, and documents within files, remain classified or have been destroyed, particularly cables between the Prime Minister and the President, and especially during the February 1967 visit of Premier Kosygin to London. British government

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18 Scholars of Anglo-American relationship characterise the relationship as cool. See Dobson, *Anglo-American Relations*; Bartlett, *'The Special Relationship'*, David Dimbleby & David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart: The Relationship between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (London: Guild Publishing, 1988). Only Philip Ziegler, *Wilson* portrays the relationship as, on the whole, warm.

19 Esmond Wright, 'The Special Relationship', *History Today* (April 1991)

20 The files most consulted at the PRO were the Foreign Office (FO371), the Prime Minister's Office file (PREM) and the Cabinet minutes (CAB).

documents are often written in formal language, that is largely dispassionate and considered. Fortunately, Harold Wilson often wrote his immediate thoughts and reactions on the documents, giving the historian some sense of the Prime Minister's personal stamp on events. President Johnson's presence is, however, noticeably absent in the papers contained in the Johnson Library. Reflecting his preference for verbal communication, particularly the use of the telephone, he rarely put his thoughts down on paper and only occasionally scribbled his responses on memoranda and letters. Consequently, LBJ's opinions and feelings are largely gauged through his actions and through second and third parties, such as advisors, ambassadors and journalists. Unfortunately, the tapes of the President's telephone conversations released and transcribed so far only cover the first few months of the Johnson presidency. The relatively few conversations between Wilson and Johnson are not yet available. However, notes and transcripts of some key conversations do exist. The great benefit of the holdings in the LBJ Library is the inclusion of personal papers as well as official ones. These papers, particularly those of Johnson's key National Security Advisors, McGeorge Bundy and Walt W. Rostow, tend to be less formal than the State Department papers, although even these are more relaxed and open than British Foreign Office minutes. The Rostow and Bundy papers, along with the cable exchanges between the British Ambassador in Washington and the Foreign Office, and the US Ambassador and the State Department, are crucial in understanding the behind-the-scenes activity that took place over Vietnam.

The papers contained in the LBJ Library and the PRO, were buttressed by published sources such as the *Pentagon Papers*, the US State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, and *Hansard*. Such official, and semi-official

documents were supplemented by the private papers of key actors and by the many diaries, memoirs and political autobiographies of the period. While generally less reliable due to the suspicion of self-aggrandisement on the part of the authors, they do provide either contemporary or retrospective explanations and justifications of British and American actions. The David Bruce diaries were particularly useful in ascertaining the day-to-day unfolding of events. Additional minor sources include newspapers and oral interviews with key politicians and diplomats. Many of these interviews were conducted on a confidential basis on the grounds that the interviewee could be more candid. In general, however, these interviews served only to confirm analysis based on consideration of available documentary evidence.

The thesis is divided into six major chapters, separated mainly around Wilson's visits to Washington. The chronological structure reveals both the oscillating nature of Anglo-American relations during the period and the processes by which policy was formulated and implemented. Ultimately, the thesis demonstrates the extent to which Vietnam was a constant undercurrent in relations between Washington and London between 1964-1968.

CHAPTER 1

CONSTRAINTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES: THE UNITED STATES, GREAT BRITAIN AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA, 1941-64

Historical Tensions over South-East Asia

The differences between the United States and Great Britain over Vietnam in the 1960's did not emerge from a vacuum; rather they were, in part at least, an expansion of much deeper disagreements about policy in South-East Asia and the Far East generally. These longstanding disagreements, rooted in the different manner and duration of the two countries' historical exposure to the region, provided a crucial context for the particular tensions of the Wilson-Johnson years.

Britain had a history in, and consequent knowledge of, South-East Asia. As H.G. Nicholas observes, even after World War II, 'here was a region largely permeated, historically, by British rule, influence or trade'.[1] The region was important to Britain largely because of the military bases of Hong Kong and Singapore and also because of the British dependency of Malaya (until 1957) which provided lucrative raw materials such as rubber, copper and tin.[2] For strategic and economic reasons, therefore, the United Kingdom was tied to the area. Moroever, Britain's experience of empire in the Far East meant it had a distinctive understanding of, and empathy with, Asian culture and affairs. America, on the other hand, was far removed from the area in terms of both history and geography, 'it owed little to American enterprise, had meant little for American strategy, and

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1 H.G. Nicholas, *Britain and the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963), p. 90

2 After the Second World War, Malaya became increasingly more important to Britain as its raw materials, mainly sold to the United States, helped support sterling.

exercised little or no sway over American sentiment'.[3] Although the United States had a long history of trading in the Far East, this did not necessitate an involved or considered relationship with the indigenous peoples there. Consequently, at times, British foreign policymakers viewed the United States as naïve and brash in its dealings with Asian nations, feeling the United States would do well to take advantage of the sophisticated insight and wisdom of the British in this area.

After the Second World War South-East Asia became an area of shared interest for Great Britain and the United States. However, the contrast between Britain's deep roots in the region and America's relatively recent involvement in Asian affairs meant that Anglo-American relations faced almost continual strain as the new superpower often rebuffed the advice of the weakening colonial power. Still, after 1945 what tied the US and the UK together on South-East Asia was the 'complicating' factor of communism, or the perceived threat of communism. This led to a 'basic identity of British and American objectives in this area; both powers wanted to contain Communism without extending the conflict to the point which involved an open war in China'.[4] In Malaya, British economic interests were directly threatened by communism in 1948 in the form of armed insurrection on the part of the Malayan Communist Party.

However, while the fear of communism proved a mutual interest in the post-war years, the two countries failed to deal with the problem successfully in Vietnam, partly due to their different assessments of the threat and varying approaches to the problem. As H. Nicholas observed, 'the paradox was that seemingly Britain, with more at stake in South-East Asia than the U.S.A., was yet more reluctant to

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3 Nicholas, *Britain and the United States*, p. 90

4 Ibid, p. 91

countenance any deeper local involvement.'[5] It will be shown that the reason for this disagreement between the transatlantic partners was partly because Great Britain was not as alarmist over the spread of communism as was the United States, but also because Britain no longer had the manpower or resources to play a large, direct role in Asia. America, on the other hand, had both the will and the capability to enlarge its influence in that part of the world.

Prior to the Johnson administration, there were four distinct periods of crisis in Anglo-American relations concerning South-East Asia: the Second World War; the years prior to the 1954 Geneva Conference; the Conference itself; and the period leading up to the planned 1956 elections in Vietnam. An examination of all four crises reveals that at times there was a lack of full co-operation and frankness between the two powers on the issue of South-East Asia and often a chasm in attitudes towards the dangers of communism and the maintenance of world peace.

The Second World War

During the Second World War the newly forged 'special relationship' faced serious threat over policy in the Far East.[6] Indeed, towards the end of the war, the situation between Britain and America on Indochina has been characterised by one historian as one of 'virtual noncommunication, coupled with a certain amount of bewilderment and suspicion'.[7]

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5 Ibid, p. 92

6 Christopher Thorne, 'Indochina and Anglo-American Relations, 1942-1945', *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 45, (February 1976), pp. 73-76

7 Ibid, p. 96

Wartime uneasiness over the future of Asia has to be understood in the context of the changing power dynamic between the United States and Great Britain. By 1942, Britain was clearly the junior partner in the Anglo-American relationship and, as Christopher Thorne points out, the US's newly emergent preponderance was nowhere more evident than in Japan.[8] The US felt that it was taking a disproportionate share of the burden within the South-East Asia Command (SEAC) and was suspicious of British motives in the area, assuming correctly that Britain's main concern was to retain or regain control of its colonies. Moreover, the British were in sharp disagreement with the Americans on how the war in the Far East should be fought. This was compounded by a military command structure that saw the British running operational matters yet the US in overall control of strategy, and by a convoluted debate over SEAC's operational boundaries.

While America and Britain were struggling to work together amicably towards ending the war in Asia, plans for the post-war world also increased tensions. The possible return of the French to Indochina, which had been occupied by Japan since 1941, was a major sticking point. President Roosevelt, and many within the State Department, were broadly anti-imperialist in sentiment and on a number of occasions the American President made his low opinion of French colonialism known. Roosevelt famously remarked that, 'after 100 years of French rule in Indochina, the inhabitants were worse off than they had been before'.[9]

Consequently, as early as 1942 FDR mooted the idea that France should not simply

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8 Ibid, p. 73

9 Franklin D. Roosevelt quoted in Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time For War: The United States and Vietnam 1941-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 13-14

take back its colonial territories, but instead, those territories should become 'trustee' nations, under the UN, until they were ready for full independence.

The British Foreign Office did not agree with Roosevelt's damning comments on French colonialism, instead believing France's record in Indochina to be, on the whole, beneficial in that it provided a stability in the region that would have otherwise been lacking. Moreover, Churchill was aware that FDR was attacking colonialism per se, and sensed a threat to British power in Asia, particularly in India. As the Roosevelt administration failed to deliver a coherent policy on either the French colonies or 'the entire question of Western colonial empires', the British were inclined to ally themselves more closely with their fellow colonialists, the French. Sensing potential conflict, and having other problems to worry about, neither President Roosevelt nor Prime Minister Churchill were willing to tackle the other over this issue. With Roosevelt's death in April 1945, and growing Western suspicion of the Soviet Union, the Americans ended their opposition to the maintenance of colonialism in Asia.[10] At the end of the war in the Pacific, the French returned to Indochina, aided by the British and supported by the Americans and with the advent of the Cold War, South-East Asia became one of the world's 'hot spots'.

Pre-Geneva years, 1945-1954

Britain's direct involvement in Vietnamese affairs began with the end of the Pacific war in August 1945. Under the jurisdiction of the July 1945 Potsdam

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10 George C. Herring, 'The Truman Administration and the Restoration of French Sovereignty in Indochina", *Diplomatic History,* Vol. 1 (Winter 1977), pp. 97-8

agreement, and as they were closer than French forces, British troops were sent to occupy key areas in Indochina as part of SEAC. Their mission was to enforce the surrender of remaining Japanese forces and to liberate prisoners of war. On arrival in Saigon the British forces, under the command of Admiral Mountbatten, encountered a confused political situation. Although the Viet Minh had occupied Northern cities, had declared Vietnamese independence and had established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam covering the South as well as the North, in reality the South was without a government and was in civil strife, with attacks on French nationals commonplace. The British forces along with the few remaining French troops and French armed civilians spent the next months using force to crush Vietnamese nationalist uprisings. By the time the French forces reached Saigon and assumed full control of South Vietnam in January 1946, British forces had sustained 40 fatalities. In this way, Britain, under the Labour Government of Clement Attlee, contributed to the re-assertion of French colonial control over Vietnam under the puppet leadership of Bao Dai.[11] The United States acquiesced in this by ignoring Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence and his continuing pleas for help. Britain's physical intervention in Vietnam ended there. However, the British Government maintained an active interest in Vietnamese affairs because of its own Far East interests - in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaya. Stability in the region continued to be essential to British trade with the Far East and to the maintenance of Commonwealth links.

By the end of 1946 a full-scale war had broken out between France and the Vietminh. At this stage the US still encouraged the French to recognise the rights of

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[11] George Rosie, *The British in Vietnam: How the twenty five year war began* (London: Panther Books, 1970), p. 11

the Vietnamese to 'some semblance of independence'. They hoped a solution to the unrest would come through the discovery of more moderate Vietnamese nationalism than the communist inspired Vietminh. By 1947-48, however, the US was financially supporting the French war effort against Vietnamese nationalists, partly to ensure de Gaulle's agreement on French entry to NATO but largely in an attempt to 'contain' communism in the area.[12]

Nevertheless, in the immediate post-war years the United States generally 'deferred to Britain's longer experience and greater immediate stake in South-east Asia and ... were prepared to keep in step with British policy and leave London to take the lead in influencing the French'.[13] The Foreign Office scrutinized events in Vietnam and kept in close contact with the French in order to persuade them to take a liberal approach to Vietnam. Britain was also one of the first governments to recognise the government of Emperor Bao Dai who had been installed by the French in their plan for Vietnam (along with Laos and Cambodia) to become Associated States of the French Union: 'thus diplomatically recognising the Government of Vietnam under the Emperor Bao Dai as the only legitimate representative of the State of Vietnam'.[14]

Britain's position of leadership in South-East Asian affairs changed dramatically after 1949. At this stage British and American views began to diverge due to America's obsessional fear of communism and especially of 'Red China'. Alarm over China increased with the 1949 Chinese revolution, was encouraged by

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12 Herring, "Truman Administration", pp. 104-5 Indirectly at first, through the Marshall Plan.

13 C. Mary Turnbull, "Britain and Vietnam, 1948-1955", *War and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (September 1988), p. 104

14 Note delivered by HM Ambassador at Paris to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 7, 1950, Doc. No. 6 in *Cmnd 2834, Documents relating to British Involvement in the Indo-China Conflict 1945-1965* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1965)

the Congressional China Lobby and grew to extreme proportions with the start of the Korean War in June 1950. Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles' policy of 'brinkmanship' and President Eisenhower's domino theory were applied to the situation in South-East Asia. In May 1952 the fact that Chinese ground troops were stationed close to the border with Vietnam alerted the Americans to the possibility that China might intervene militarily in Indochina.

By early 1950 the US had also diplomatically recognised the French puppet Government in Saigon led by former emperor Bao Dai. Direct aid to South Vietnam began in spring 1950 and lasted until the French withdrawal from Indochina in June 1954. The US monetary contribution totalled approximately $2.76 billion and the 'US contribution for fiscal 1954' accounted for '78% of the total cost of the war to France.'[15]

The British, while supporting much of US policy in the area, thought the Chinese were unlikely to enter the war in Vietnam as they would gain nothing by internationalizing the conflict.[16] China thus became the root of the differences between the British and the Americans in the Far East and indeed in 1951 the British Foreign Office described the country as 'a major irritant in Anglo-American relations'.[17] Although the British were alarmed at the communist victory in China, they were less likely than the Americans to see a monolithic communism and believed heavy handling of the Vietnam situation would only push the Chinese closer to the Soviets. Washington vehemently disagreed with the British view that China

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15 David S. Painter and Sally G. Irvine, *The Geneva Conference of 1954: Indochina*, Pew Case Studies in International Affairs (Washington D.C., 1988), p. 3

16 Anthony Eden, *The Memoirs of Sir Anthony Eden: Full Circle* (London: Cassell & Co, 1960), p. 83

17 Foreign Office memorandum and comments by Eden, 30 October 1951, FO371/92065/34, Public Record Office, Kew [henceforth PRO] in Kevin Ruane, '"Containing America": Aspects of British Foreign Policy and the Cold War in South-East Asia, 1951-54', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 7, No. 2, March 1996, p. 143

should be diplomatically recognised, should be admitted to the United Nations and should be traded with. The British were happy to follow a policy of containment but were convinced it was necessary to combine this with an element of compromise, being prepared to accept the realities of communist rule in China. Consequently, they were, at times, alarmed at what they saw as provocative behaviour by the US towards China.[18]

According to Kevin Ruane's study of the issue, the Churchill government was deeply concerned by US unilateralism and adventurism in Asia during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. For example, during the Korean war the US failed to consult with the British prior to launching a potentially escalatory air strike in June 1952 against power stations on the Yalu river, which marked the border between Korea and China. Ostensibly carried out under the UN mandate covering the Korean conflict, as a troop contributor the British felt they should have been fully briefed and consulted on the issue. On this occasion British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden 'watered down his public criticism' of the Americans but only 'after a plea from Churchill to avoid an open display of Anglo-American disunity.' [19] Throughout the pre-Geneva period (1951-4), the Americans remained evasive with the British on the exact nature of their views on Indochina and were not willing to 'accord the British access to their strategic plans for the area in the event of any type of military conflict'.[20] The US had now taken on the mantle of most dominant power in South-East Asia and saw no benefit in working in partnership with the British, not only because of their differences over China, but also because the British were no longer

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[18] Kevin Ruane, 'Anthony Eden, British Diplomacy and the Origins of the Geneva Conference of 1954', *The Historical Journal*, 37, 1, 1994, p. 156

[19] Ibid, p. 152

[20] G. Wyn Rees, *Anglo-American Approaches to Alliance Security, 1955-1960*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 153

in a position to achieve partner status. With a diminishing military capability in the area, the 'National Security Council in Washington directed that Britain be accorded no special status in U.S. planning in South-East Asia over and above other allies'.[21] The lack of defence co-ordination and diplomatic consultation was extremely irritating to the British who felt that their colonial and commercial experience in Asia, and their continued military presence East of Suez warranted some recognition. The British hoped to be able to exercise some influence on the Americans in the formulation and execution of their policies in the region. This wish became urgent in December 1953 after the Bermuda Summit of Western heads of state when the British were left with the impression that the US wanted war with China and, even more worryingly, that the US now felt that atomic weapons were part of conventional weaponry.[22]

With the French ready to admit defeat in Vietnam and the Americans anticipating their own response to a French withdrawal, the British now felt that the US presented a grave threat to peace in the area and that it was therefore necessary to 'contain' America.[23]

The Geneva Conference

The Geneva Conference began on 25 April 1954 and ended on 21 July 1954 and was convened to discuss both Korea and Indochina. The representatives of Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (the North), France, Laos, the

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21 Ibid

22 Ibid, pp. 160-161

23 Kevin Ruane, '"Containing America": Aspects of British Foreign Policy and the Cold War in South-East Asia, 1951-4', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 7, Pt. 1 (1996)

People's Republic of China, the State of Vietnam (the South), the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America took part in discussions on Indochina.

Events prior to and during the Geneva Conference illustrated Britain's increasing ambivalence towards the situation in South-East Asia, especially in relation to the United States' growing involvement there. Even before the start of the conference, Anthony Eden and John Foster Dulles clashed over Vietnam. In order to persuade the French Government to continue their now unpopular military campaign in Vietnam (and therefore keep a pro-European Defence Community government in power), Britain managed to get Indochina on the agenda of the planned Geneva Conference to discuss the situation in Korea. Getting the Americans to attend a conference on Indochina with the Chinese also in attendance strained Anglo-American relations.[24] In addition, the Americans were extremely reluctant to discuss events in Vietnam until the military situation had improved.

By the time of the Geneva Conference Britain and America placed emphasis on different aspects of the problem in Vietnam. The British felt that stability in the region was of paramount importance and, while hoping the French could militarily weaken the Vietminh before withdrawing, were willing to countenance plans that included some communist influence in the country if it avoided a general war. The Americans, on the other hand, maintained that only preventing the spread of communism would ultimately bring peace to the area.

Although by April 1954 Eden was committed to a negotiated settlement in Vietnam via the Geneva Conference, recent research has shown that Eden came to

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24 Ruane, 'Anthony Eden', pp. 153-172

this decision late and did so because of the deteriorating military situation at Dien Bien Phu and because of the consequent escalatory plans the US had for Vietnam. Dulles felt that a satisfactory diplomatic settlement could not be reached and that armed intervention was now inevitable.[25]

At the beginning of April 1954, with the French military position worsening by the minute, Dulles and Admiral Arthur Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, asked Britain and other allied nations to join them in warning the Chinese against interference in Vietnam and that this 'would carry with it the threat of naval and air action against the Chinese coast and of active intervention in Indo-China itself.'[26] The same nations were also asked to participate in 'united action' to prevent a French defeat in Vietnam.[27] This action included a massive air strike to relieve the French who were struggling to cope with a Vietminh siege at Dien Bien Phu. Despite denials from those involved in American decision-making, the French later claimed that the US had considered loaning them atomic weapons. Eden, not surprisingly given previous suspicions about American rashness, refused to 'commit British forces to operations in Indo-China' on the grounds that the American proposal was not fully thought out and was more likely to provoke the Chinese into action.[28] As Ruane notes, 'Britain set out to resist American plans to internationalize the conflict, for although Viet-Nam was important, it was not worth saving at the cost of inviting Chinese and possibly Soviet counter-intervention, and unleashing a third (nuclear) world war.'[29] According to British documents, Eden's

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25 Turnbull, 'Britain and Vietnam', p. 118
26 Ibid, p. 92
27 Ruane, 'Containing America', p. 142
28 Ibid, p. 94
29 Ruane, 'Anthony Eden', p. 171

refusal to countenance armed intervention in Vietnam put Anglo-American relations in the region under 'the gravest strain'.[30] America would have intervened militarily in Vietnam 'had not the congressional leadership ... made intervention conditional on British participation.'[31]

In theory the British supported the idea of a collective defence organization for South-East Asia, largely because it would help in the defence of Singapore and Hong Kong, but also because it might help restrain the Americans. However, Eden was not prepared to participate in any such undertaking before the Geneva Conference in case it pre-empted proceedings there: 'Denied British support - the key to wider allied and international approval - and unwilling to intervene on its own, the Eisenhower administration had no alternative but to await the outcome of the conference.'[32]

In the event, and much to everyone's surprise, the Conference issued two final documents on Vietnam. The first one, the Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Viet-Nam, Geneva, 20 July 1954 provided for a demarcation line to be drawn at the 17th parallel to the North of which the Viet Minh (the People's Army of Vietnam) would regroup while to the South, the French Union forces would regroup. The French Republic agreed in an annexe to this Agreement to withdraw from Vietnam. Until democratic elections to reunify the country could be held, an International Commission for Supervision and Control (India, Canada and Poland) would oversee the free movement of troops and civilians, and check that no new military equipment

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30 Ruane, 'Containing America', p. 142

31 George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, 'Eisenhower, Dulles and Dienbienphu: 'The Day We Didn't Go to War' Revisited', *Journal of American History,* 71, (September 1984)

32 Ruane, 'Containing America', p. 142

or additional troops were introduced (except for replacement purposes and unit rotations). Foreign troops and military bases were also specifically prohibited.[33]

The second document, the Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference, 21 July, 1954 was somewhat different. Whereas the Agreement on Vietnam was 'a formal instrument in the usual treaty form', the Final Declaration was not signed and appeared 'to have the character properly of a statement of intention or policy on the part of those member States of the Conference who approved.'[34] The Final Declaration duly recognised the temporary demarcation line allowed for in the Agreement and expressed satisfaction at the ending of hostilities. Its main significance, however, was its more detailed explanation of the proposed general election, declaring it should be held in Vietnam in July of 1956. This would soon prove to be an area of major disagreement. In the meantime the members of the Conference agreed:

> to consult one another on any question which may be referred to them by the International Supervisory Commission, in order to study such measures as may prove necessary to ensure that the agreements on the cessation of hostilities in Cambodia, Laos and Viet-Nam are respected.[35]

The main difficulty with the Final statement was its lack of treaty status. This was compounded when the Government of Vietnam (the Bao Dai government) issued a statement on 18 July 1954 dissociating itself from discussions on the Conference's final resolution on the grounds that it could not be party to a cease-fire based on partition. Eden was also unable to persuade the United States to be a party to the

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33 *Cmnd 2834*, pp. 16-17
34 Ibid, p. 16
35 Ibid, p. 17

Final Declaration; instead the Americans made a declaration of their own in which they agreed to 'refrain from the threat or the use of force' to disturb the Geneva settlements.[36] Therefore, as neither the South Vietnamese nor the United States government signed the Geneva Agreements the seeds of conflicting international interpretations of the Conference resolutions were sown. Both sides constantly accused the other of violating the Agreements and as the first step towards peace called for the other side to abide by them.

The Post-Geneva Period

Eden felt that, at Geneva, he had achieved a workable solution to the crisis in Vietnam, one that the Americans would abide by. And, indeed, Eden gained much credit for his actions at Geneva. While willing to acknowledge the loss of North Vietnam, London felt the Accords, if fully implemented, would avoid war, and therefore help promote stability in the area. It soon became clear, however, that Eisenhower and Dulles had no intentions of honouring the Agreements. Washington was now obsessed with containing communism to the 17th parallel. Publicly, the US argued it was abiding by the Agreements; privately, it regularly acknowledged that its action were in breach of the spirit and the letter of them. The Americans vowed to strengthen the anti-communist government in the South of Vietnam - a pursuit that became known as 'nation building'. Ignoring any European advice, the Americans 'displayed the curious mixture of realism and hopefulness that came to characterize the entire twenty-year crusade' in Vietnam.[37] During the post-Geneva period: 'The

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36 Declaration by the Representative of the United States, Geneva, 21 July, 1954 in *Cmnd. 2834*, p. 86

37 Arthur Combs, 'The Path Not Taken: The British Alternative to U.S. Policy in Vietnam, 1954-1956', *Diplomatic History,* Vol. 19, Pt. 1 (1995), p. 39

Americans' "can do" attitude, their refusal to give an inch, and their characteristic belief in an ideal solution appeared to Europeans as negligently naive.'[38]

Washington also managed to keep its military options open by establishing the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in September 1954. Its full members were the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines. South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos could not be members as this would have directly violated the Geneva accord that outlawed involvement in military alliances. Instead, the countries of Indochina were named as 'protocol' states to be defended by the SEATO powers. In future years SEATO obligations would thereby be used to legitimize US involvement in Vietnam.

In October 1955 a referendum deposed H.M. Bao Dai, established the Republic of Vietnam, and made Ngo Dinh Diem President. Diem upheld Bao Dai's view that the South was not bound by the Geneva resolutions and would not therefore participate in the proposed general election planned for July 1956. The Democratic Republic in the North was enraged. It was convinced, with good reason, that the country would be reunited under the rule of Ho Chi Minh at the elections. Despite diplomatic efforts to resolve this problem (Her Majesty's Government recommended that the Government of Vietnam participate), little could be done while the South Vietnamese Government refused to acknowledge the Geneva Agreements. The North Vietnamese and the Chinese insisted that the South Vietnamese Government was obliged by the Geneva Agreements as France had signed on behalf of the southern part of Vietnam and that signatories 'and their successors' were responsible for observance of the Agreements.[39] While their lack

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[38] Ibid p. 38

[39] Letter to the Foreign Secretary from Mr. Chou En-Lai, Peking, 31 October 1955 in *Cmnd 2834*, p. 114

of respect for the Geneva Agreements was the primary reason for the South Vietnamese Government's refusal to allow elections, a given subsidiary reason was their belief that the Communist North would never conduct free and open elections. The North suggested that this was a lame excuse for the fact that the South Vietnamese Government would have been overwhelmingly defeated in a democratic election. Although the US agreed with the South Vietnamese position that elections should be fair, it too was also sure the communists would win if elections took place.[40]

At Geneva, the Democratic Republic in the North had only agreed to the temporary division of the country and when the international community acquiesced in the South Vietnamese Government's refusal of elections to reunite Vietnam, the North began to actively support and encourage nationalist unrest in the South. It was at this stage that the US began to argue that the Geneva Conference had confirmed the existence of two separate states in Vietnam, and that the North was now an aggressor nation in relation to South Vietnam. Throughout this period the North Vietnamese and the Chinese continually pressed the Co-Chairmen for a conference to discuss implementation of the Geneva Agreements. However, Great Britain encouraged the US and the newly elected Diem Government in South Vietnam to consider complying with the Geneva Agreement to hold elections on reunification in July 1956. Saigon and Washington refused to sanction their go-ahead. So, by the mid-1950s Britain was, as Mary Turnbull puts it, 'reduced to the role of frustrated bystander' in relation to events in Vietnam.[41]

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[40] Eisenhower said in his memoirs that "had elections been held as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80 per cent of the population would have voted for the communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader rather than the Chief of State Bao Dai." Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change* (New York: Signet, 1965), p. 449

[41] Turnbull, 'Britain and Vietnam', p. 121

While the North Vietnamese maintained that acts of terrorism in the South were spontaneous uprisings against the corrupt government of Ngo Dinh Diem, by late 1959 around 90,000 Vietminh cadres had gone South to help organise revolutionary warfare. Shortly afterwards the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (the NLF) was formed. Although North Vietnamese help was important the unpopularity of the US-installed Diem regime was also apparent. The debate in Britain, as elsewhere, now centred on whether the North Vietnamese were attempting 'a calculated Communist take-over bid' or whether the country was in civil war.[42] The Conservative Government believed the former, and in 1957 were convinced that 'the absence of all freedom in the Northern territories makes it impracticable for the time being to deal with the preparatory problems involved in the question of all-Viet-Namese elections'.[43]

As American involvement in Vietnam deepened in the late 1950s, a number of features characterized Anglo-American relations vis-à-vis South-East Asia. Firstly, although agreeing that communism should be contained, Washington and London still differed over how best to do this. This difference in approach originated from varying perceptions of the threat posed by expansionary communism, particularly Chinese-backed communism. In retrospect it is clear that Britain had a more balanced view of the problem of communism, recognising that indigenous uprisings in the area were not necessarily sponsored by China or the Soviet Union and therefore should be taken on their own merit. Secondly, this less inflammatory approach resulted from Britain's long colonial experience in the area, an experience that the Americans had by the mid-50s discounted. America's lack of recognition of

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42 Doc No 110, Extract from the proceedings of the House of Commons, 26 March, 1963 in *Cmnd 2834*, p. 195

43 Extract from Proceedings of the House of Lords, 25 June 1957 in *Cmnd 2834*, p. 127

British experience caused much irritation in British diplomatic circles, particularly as it was a key facet of their attempt to maintain status without power. Anglo-American diplomacy surrounding events in South-East Asia was therefore fraught with suspicion and frustrations. The lack of agreement over the exact nature of the threat from communism, America's distrust of advice from colonial powers, and Britain's readjustment to its new world role, meant that discussions on the issue of Vietnam were often guarded and insincere. The United States, in particular, kept its cards close to its chest. This lack of openness led its allies to believe its policies were naîve and/or provocative and that they lacked clarity and coherence. Due to its diminishing power, Britain often felt unable to criticise the Americans on Vietnam because it needed US support and co-operation in other areas, particularly in NATO and Europe. Finally, regardless of Britain's declining fortunes, the US did recognise that British commitment and support for its Far East policy, and on Vietnam on particular, was of immense psychological and political value. Despite overall co-operation between Great Britain and the United States in South-East Asia, these features, particularly the secrecy, would be repeated in the 1960s as America stepped up its involvement in Vietnam.

Britain, Vietnam and the Geneva Conference

The Geneva Conference also left the British with another responsibility and another problem: the British Foreign Secretary's role as Co-Chair of the Conference. It is crucial to appreciate Britain's role as Co-Chair because of later arguments as to

the nature of this role. The British alternatively used this role as an excuse for its relative inaction in Vietnam, or as justification for its attempts at mediation.

The United Kingdom and the Soviet Union were chosen to occupy the chair at Geneva for two main reasons. Firstly, the Conference was organised largely at the behest of the British and the Soviets, therefore the two countries already had experience of working together on this problem and of dealing with the interested parties. And secondly, as the Conference roughly comprised two opposing groups (US, UK, France and its associated states against USSR, China and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam), and as some governments were not recognised by others, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union acted in some degree as intermediaries between the two groups. So as they were 'regarded generally as the less extreme members of their respective groups' they also provided the chairman at alternate sessions.[44] As a consequence the two countries were seen as having a greater responsibility for Indo-Chinese affairs than did the rest of the represented states. This perception continued even after the end of the Conference itself despite the fact that no formal recognition of the Co-Chair's roles was given in the Conference's two final documents. In fact, the only clause directly relating to the members' responsibility to consult with one another did not refer to any formal procedures or machinery which would allow them to do so. Nevertheless, Eden as Britain's Foreign Secretary did, in his final session in the Chair, agree reluctantly that the Co-Chairmen would deal with the Conference's financial problems:

> Certain costs arise from the decisions which the Conference has taken. It is suggested that it should be left here to your Chairmen

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44 Narrative in *Cmnd 2834*, p. 13

> as their parting gift to try to put before you some proposal in respect of those costs. I only wish to add in that connection that, as this Conference is peculiar in not having any Secretariat in the usual sense of the term, the two Chairmen, with considerable reluctance, are prepared to undertake this highly invidious task. The costs to which I refer are not our own but those of the International Commission.[45]

In 1956 the Co-Chairmen achieved an agreement on finance which put the major burden on the three Commission powers - India, Canada and Poland - while other costs would be shared by the signatories of the Agreements. Still, 'the allocation of contributions amongst the several governments and the need to induce governments to pay their shares imposed a heavy and continuing administrative burden on the Co-Chairmen.'[46]

The work of the International Commissions in Vietnam was expected to be short-term, lasting roughly until the general election allowing for reunification. When these elections were not held, the work of the Commission continued longer than expected as did the burdens assigned to the Co-Chairmen. A 1965 British Command Paper stated that 'the Co-Chairmanship thus survived as the only residual machinery of the Geneva Conference.'[47] It was for this reason alone that Russia and the United Kingdom had additional tasks imposed on them. The International Commission was to report to Conference members on any problems they faced; yet no channel had been established for the issuing of such reports. The Co-Chairmen became the channel 'as a matter of practical convenience.'[48]

The consequence of this action was that Britain's involvement in Indo-Chinese affairs increased greatly. Not only were there many reports to publish and

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45 Ibid, p. 18
46 Ibid
47 Ibid, p. 19
48 Ibid

circulate - between 1954 and 1961, there were eleven Interim reports from the Commission in Vietnam; seven from the Commission in Cambodia; and four from the Commission in Laos - but the fact that the Co-Chairmen adopted this task meant that they became, in effect, go-betweens between the International Commission and the Conference members.[49] Not surprisingly, Britain and Russia gradually became more than mere publishers of reports. The failure of the Geneva resolutions to foresee the need for authorised responsibility and to establish machinery for dealing with the problems that would inevitably occur in Indochina meant that ad hoc arrangements turned into accepted practice.

Moreover, as it was not practicable to co-ordinate action between all members of the Conference when the Commission reported problems, the Co-Chairmen 'took the initiative in trying to resolve the difficulties which arose, for the very good reason that there was no one else to do so.'[50] This often involved the Co-Chairmen acting as 'a medium of communication between opposing interests within and without the affected countries.'[51] There are many examples of situations in which action of this kind occurred but it is necessary to describe only one particular case for illustrative purposes. The Agreement on Vietnam allowed for the free movement of civilians wishing to change residence between one zone and the other. In May of 1955 complaints were received from the Commission and within the House of Commons that the North Vietnamese government was obstructing the movement of would-be refugees and in consequence of such delays the transfer of all those civilians wishing to move South would not be possible within the time allowed, which is to say, before

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49 Ibid

50 Ibid. p. 20

51 Ibid

the proposed 1956 elections. After communication between the Co-Chairmen, the Soviets announced that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had agreed to a month's extension. The Commission duly received confirmation of this agreement.[52]

While the Co-Chairmen's responsibilities with regard to Laos were regularised during the Geneva Conference on Laos in 1962, the situation with regard to Vietnam and Cambodia never achieved such formality. Nevertheless, the formalisation of practices in Laos had the effect of strengthening the informal nature of the Co-Chairman's role regarding Vietnam.

There can be no doubt that Her Majesty's Government, under the leadership of Prime Ministers Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan, was uneasy about the increased responsibilities it had assumed on such dubious authority. One of the main problems was that domestic political pressure was often placed on the British Government to interpret the clauses in the Geneva Conference resolutions in a particular way. In December 1955 the legal position of the Co-Chairman was clarified in the foreword to the Fourth Interim Report of the Commission in Vietnam (Cmnd 9654):

> in view of numerous public references to the role of the two Co-Chairmen of the Geneva Conference, Her Majesty's Government consider it desirable to place on record their view of the position.... In the view of Her Majesty's Government their obligations and responsibilities and those of the Soviet Government are neither more nor less than those of other Powers adhering to the Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference. For reasons of practical convenience, however, it has become customary for Her Majesty's Government and the Soviet Government to act as a channel of communication between the International Supervisory Commissions and the Geneva Powers, to co-ordinate arrangements for the distribution and

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52 Hansard, House of Commons Debate, Fifth Series [henceforth Hansard] Vol. 556, 4 May 1955, Written Answer, 76, Col. 134, Oral Answer 55, Col. 1901

> publication of the Commissions' reports .... The existence of these informal arrangements does not, of course, in any way affect the position and obligations under the Geneva Agreements of Her Majesty's Government and the Soviet Government or derogate in any way from the responsibilities of members of the Geneva Conference as a whole in regard to the Geneva Agreements .... [53]

Despite this clarification the Conservative Government continued to be troubled about its role. It did not, however, feel any uneasiness over its interpretation of events in Vietnam, especially regarding the United States' involvement. In the late 1950s and early 1960s the Tories were well aware of Washington's infringements of the Geneva accords, particularly the introduction of large numbers of military advisers, but still maintained rhetorical support for US action in Vietnam.[54]

The fact that the Conservative Government chose not to side with the Communist government in North Vietnam was hardly surprising; the fact that it had sympathies with South Vietnam and the United States was also understandable; but what was not clear was whether Britain as Co-Chair of the Geneva Conference should have at least feigned impartiality over Vietnam in order to act effectively as a mediator. This question was part of the general confusion over the exact nature of Britain's responsibility as Co-Chair. Certainly the British Government could argue that the Soviets could hardly be considered neutral on the situation in Vietnam and more importantly, the two nations had been given the Chair at Geneva precisely because of their links to opposing countries and ideologies. The Conservative

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53 Foreword to the Fourth Interim Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control in Viet-Nam, December 1955 in *Cmnd 2834*, p. 89

54 The International Control Commission concludes in 1962 "that the Republic of Vietnam has violated Articles 16 and 17 of the Geneva Agreement in receiving the increased military aid from the United States .... [T]he establishment of a U.S. Military Assistance Command in South Vietnam, as well as the introduction of a large number of U.S. military personnel beyond the stated strength of the MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group), amount to a factual military alliance, which is prohibited under Article 19 of the Geneva Agreement ...' (Special Report, International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam. [Vietnam No. 1 919620.] Great Britain Parliamentary Sessional Paper. Quoted in Harry S. Ashmore and William C. Baggs, *Mission to Hanoi: A Chronicle of Double-Dealing in High Places*. (New York: G.P. Putmans's Sons, 1969)

Government could also claim that the Agreement on Vietnam and the Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference had not 'formally' assigned any special duties to the Co-Chairmen and therefore, in a sense, they had no more or less responsiblities to act in a neutral manner than any of the other Geneva powers. However, as the practical help Britain gave the United States and South Vietnam remained low-key, it can be assumed that the Conservative Government still had hopes of playing an important role in the resolution of the conflict precisely because of its position as a Geneva Co-Chair. To many within British political circles, the role of Co-Chair was not being fully utilised by the British; the Conservatives were too passive. Indeed many critics of Conservative policy on Vietnam hoped a Labour government would be less closely aligned to the Americans and take a more pro-active role as far as Co-Chair position was concerned. Thus, expectations of the Foreign Secretary's position Geneva Co-Chair grew rapidly once Labour came to power in October 1964. Such hopes proved unrealistic.

The Search for Allies - The US, Britain & Vietnam

Throughout the Kennedy and Johnson years, the United States government was alert to the propaganda benefits of a making its involvement in South-East Asia appear part of an allied crusade to prevent communist domination of the area. The Americans welcomed, and in some cases demanded, troop deployments or other assistance in Vietnam from other countries.[55] The addition of extra trained manpower would have helped ease the demand for American 'boys'. However, as

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55 Eventually more than 40 nations provided assistance to the Republic of Vietnam.

many military strategists argued, the logistical and language problems inherent in multi-national armed forces meant that the main benefits of third party support were psychological and political. In the 'zero-sum' atmosphere of the Cold War, the Americans would have liked to have had as many world powers as possible lining up on their side in Vietnam. The US understood that its ability to win the war, especially the propaganda war, would be enhanced if Vietnam could be turned into an allied crusade, thereby invoking images of the Second World War and Korea. Having Britain on its side was of particular importance because of its roles in the Western Alliance and the UN Security Council. Britain was also a leading 'social' democracy whose example counted. Any condemnation or ambivalence on their part would be seized upon by North Vietnam as proof of the weakness of America's cause. William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Affairs, later argued that a British troop commitment would also have had an impact on the US domestic scene, believing it 'would have made a considerable psychological difference ... particularly in liberal circles, which was where the main criticism of the war came from'.[56] LBJ recalled telling Wilson in their July 1966 Washington meeting that, 'a platoon of bagpipers would be sufficient, it was the British flag that was needed'.[57] Or as Dean Rusk put it to the journalist Louis Heren: 'All we needed was a regiment. The Black Watch would have done.'[58]

From the early sixties onwards, the United States increased its military involvement in South Vietnam. The Kennedy administration introduced 948 military

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56 David Dimbleby, BBC1 Interview with William Bundy in David Dimbleby and David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart: The Relationship between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (London: Guild Publishing, 1988), p. 252

57 Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government, 1964-68: A Personal Record* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p. 264

58 Louis Heren, *No Hail, No Farewell* (London: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 231

advisors in November 1961 and by the time of the President's death in November 1963 there were 16,000 advisors stationed in Vietnam, including the elite forces known as the Green Berets.[59] During this period the Conservative Government came under two intense, and sometimes conflicting, pressures. From across the Atlantic came continual calls for either a British troop involvement in Vietnam or stronger diplomatic or technical support. At home the leadership faced increasing parliamentary pressure to define its position regarding the situation in Vietnam, particularly in regard to its role as Co-Chair of the Geneva Conference. The Conservative government under the leadership of Harold Macmillan (1957-1963) and Sir Alec Douglas-Home (1963-1964) struggled to deal with the dual problem. Documents from the Kennedy era reveal constant and often forceful enquiries on the part of the American government into the possibility of increased allied help over Vietnam, with Britain as one of main targets of such requests. As early as 1954, at the Geneva Conference, the American government had looked into the likelihood of British military involvement. As noted earlier, Eden refused. With the advent of the Kennedy administration and as America's own intervention in Vietnamese affairs intensified, even more exhaustive enquiries into the possibility of allied contributions began. The discussion of 'Task Force Vietnam' inevitably encompassed the idea of 'internationalizing' the problem. Along with the possibility of UN assistance (as ground observers) and the consideration of US involvement under the 'SEATO umbrella', the Kennedy advisors were particularly keen to get the British committed 'politically' to the defense of South Vietnam.[60] One aide admitted that 'others

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59 Robert McMahon (Ed), *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* (D.C. Health & Co., 1995), p. 159

60 Bob Komer to Walt Rostow, 3 May 1961, NSF, Countries, Vietnam, General, Box 193, 5/3/61-5/7/61, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston [henceforth JFKL]; Telegram from Nolting to Secretary of State, "Task Force Viet Nam", 18 July 1961, NSF, Box 231, South-East Asia, Rostow Memos Viet-Nam, 7/21/61, JFKL

should share with us the responsibility for Viet-Nam' and that British participation would 'maximise the political benefits to be obtained within the western alliance by sharing responsibility for this difficult problem'.[61] In July 1961 this resulted in a private, bilateral agreement between the British Government and the Government of South Vietnam (GVN) to establish the British Advisory Group in South Vietnam, or British Advisory Mission (BRIAM) as it became known. The purpose of this Mission was revealed to the House in a written answer on 23 October 1961 when Mr Edward Heath answered questions on behalf of the Government on the circumstances surrounding the Mission:

> The Government of the Republic of Vietnam, one of whose major problems is the lack of a sufficient number of trained administrators, requested Her Majesty's Government to provide expert assistance in the field of administrative co-ordination and police matters. Her Majesty's Government agreed to dispatch an Advisory Mission to Saigon for this purpose. The British Advisory Mission to Vietnam, which arrived in Saigon at the end of September, consists of three officers and a small administrative staff led by Mr. R.G.K. Thompson.[62]

The three officers were 'former members of the Malayan Civil Service' and were attached to the US counter-insurgency team in Saigon. Robert Thompson was a defence civil servant who had demonstrated his credentials in counter-insurgency during the 12 year long Malayan emergency.[63] The costs of this mission were expected to total £110,000 per annum and the Mission was not expected to issue reports on its work to the Government. This angered many opposition MPs who felt

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61 'A Program of Action: To Prevent Communist Domination of South Vietnam', 1 May 1961, Top Secret, Task Force, NSF, Vietnam, 1/61-7/61, JFKL

62 Hansard, 23 October 1961, Vol. 646, Col. 13,

63 Thompson led BRIAM until 1965. Even after this date Thompson was consulted by President Johnson and President Nixon. See Sir Robert Thompson, *Make For The Hills* (London: Leo Cooper, 1989) and Richard Clutterbuck, 'Sir Robert Thompson: A Lifetime in Counterinsurgency', *Army Quarterly & Defence Journal*, Vol. 120, Pt. 2 (1990)

the Mission should be closely monitored by Parliament. While denying that BRIAM was involved in the planning of specific operations, the Mission's role remained suspect throughout 1962 and 1963. Still, in October 1963 the Government advised Parliament in response to a written question, that the Mission's life was to be extended to March 1965.[64] Its role was to advise on counter-insurgency techniques the British had mastered during the Malayan emergency in the 1950s and the strategic hamlets, which became a cornerstone of the US policy of pacification was 'the child of the British Advisory Mission'.[65] Documents recently released under the thirty-year rule also reveal that the Mission did, in fact, help plan the clearing of Communists from the Mekong Delta.[66]

Closely associated with this venture was a British sponsored Jungle-Warfare Training School in Jahore, Malayasia where American and South Vietnamese soldiers were trained in guerrilla tactics.[67] Other assistance to the US struggle included Royal Navy training exercises with the South Vietnamese navy and passing on to the Americans any Vietnamese radio traffic intercepted by the British signals intelligence outstation in Hong Kong.[68]

Still this military and non-military aid was not enough to assuage the Americans. Kennedy was advised by his aides in a memorandum discussing, amongst other things, the 'problem of allied support' on November 15, 1961 that he should 'get as much backing as possible from Allies' and that 'this means a strong

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64 Hansard, Written Answer, 24 October, 1963, Vol. 684, Col 235

65 Report on "Developments in Viet-Nam Between General Taylor's Visits - October 1961-October 1962", NSF, Vietnam, Box 197, 10/1/62-6/30/63, JFKL

66 Foreign Office Minute, 23 February 1961, FO371/166726, PRO

67 Between January 1964 and November 1967, the British Government trained 240 US troops and 1,035 South Vietnamese troops at the School. The cost for the training of South Vietnamese troops alone was £132,364. *The Times*, 7 November 1967

68 British Embassy, Saigon to Right Hon. The Earl of Home, 22 August 1962, FO371/166753, PRO; Duncan Campbell, *The Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier* (London: Paladin, 1986), p. 142

line with [the] British'.[69] The need for 'multilateral participation from ... allies and other friendly nations' was made clear to Ambassadors in Washington on November 17 and 18, 1961 when such nations were formally requested for 'public support and economic and military contributions'.[70]

In late November 1961 Edward Heath, in his position as Lord Privy Seal declined during House of Commons questions to 'give an assurance that no British troops will be used or stationed in Vietnam'. David Bruce, US Ambassador to Great Britain, remarked to Washington that this was 'most significant' and it does perhaps indicate that at this point the situation regarding a British troop contribution was still fluid.[71] However, the fact that the Labour opposition regularly called on the Government to recommend the reconvening of the Geneva Conference to discuss the deteriorating situation in Vietnam and questioned the 'civilian' status of the British Advisory Mission may have led the Conservative Government to doubt the political wisdom of a British military involvement in Vietnam, especially as the British public was not clear that a British interest was at stake. In March 1962 Harold Wilson, then Chairman of the opposition Labour Party, was one of many opposition MPs to urge the Government as Co-Chair of the Geneva Conference to reconvene the Conference in order to stabilize the situation in Vietnam. He also made the point that 'this situation would perhaps have been eased if all of us had carried out our commitments with regard to the holding of free elections in Vietnam.'[72] This implied criticism of

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69 Memo for the President, 15 November 1962, Subject: Notes for Talk with Rusk - November 15, NSF, Box 195, Vietnam, General, 11/14/61-11/15/61, JFKL

70 Department of State telegram, NSF, Box 195, Vietnam, General 11/18/61-11/20/61, JFKL; Memo for McGeorge Bundy from Department of State, Top Secret, 20 November 1961, Subject: Status of Actions with Respect to South Viet-Nam, NSF, Box 195, Vietnam, General, Memos and Reports, 11/17/61-11/31/61, JFKL

71 Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, Washington, Dec 2, 1961, 2pm, NSF, Box 195, Countries-Vietnam General 12/1/61-12/2/61, JFKL

72 Hansard. Oral Answer, 14 March 1962, Vol. 676, Col. 1318

both the British and American Governments was later withheld, after Wilson became Prime Minister. It was, however, indicative of the future Prime Minister's personal feelings on the matter.

Despite mounting Parliamentary concern the Conservative Government continued to defend staunchly United States' policy in Vietnam without sending British troops. Nevertheless, by 1963 and 1964 the Conservative Foreign Secretary, Rab Butler, was facing numerous enquiries on Vietnam from backbenchers from all three main political parties. He was persistently questioned by one MP in particular, left-wing Labour backbencher William Warbey, who warned of the dangers of American and British involvement in a what was essentially a civil war. It seems therefore that even before Labour took office not only was Vietnam becoming a left-wing issue, but also that American pressure on the British government to send troops to Vietnam was now counterbalanced by skeptical domestic opinion over the US' handling of events in South-East Asia.

It is possible to conclude that by 1964 while Britain and America had a common objective in containing communism in Asia, they also had a history of disharmony over how to achieve this. Anglo-American relations in this area were further complicated by the misunderstandings surrounding Britain's role as Co-Chair of the Geneva Conference. By the early 1960s one can recognize the emergence and steady growth of countervailing pressures on the British government with regard to its policy on South-East Asia. This situation was made even more difficult by two further, related problems that the Labour Government inherited on coming to office in October 1964: the position of sterling, and the over-extension of UK defence forces.

British Defence Commitments East of Suez

In the 1950s and 1960s British foreign policy placed Anglo-American relations at its centre, recognising its need for an ally that could be a key provider of manpower and resources in areas where Britain still retained interests. This has been described by Kevin Ruane as wanting 'power-by-proxy'.[73] By the early 1960s Britain's military commitments overseas in the early 1960s included major deployments in Europe, the Middle East and the Far East. Still, with decolonisation well under way, the Foreign Office anticipated a reduced military burden combined with a continuance of British influence and interests in its former colonial areas. As Darwin has argued:

> the passage to independence was not expected to mean the liquidation of British interests in the region or country concerned, moreover Britain usually had a vested interest in the survival and viability of the successor state that had replaced colonial rule.[74]

By 1962, the Minister of Defence could state that Britain's military strength was 'no longer a concept of British forces dispersed around the world in small pockets but a concentration on three main bases .... Britain, Aden and Singapore.'[75]

Although the Foreign Office had expected a reduced overseas military burden due to having fewer colonies to defend, in the short term the opposite happened in Malaysia. The Malaysian Federation had been established in September 1963 and

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73 Kevin Ruane, 'Containing America', p. 150

74 John Darwin, 'Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez' in Carl Bridge (Ed.), *Munich to Vietnam: Australia's Relations with Britain and the United States since the 1930s* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1991), p. 146

75 Ibid, p. 148

comprised Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak (former British colonies) and Singapore (which seceded from the federation in August 1965). It was hoped that, 'here ... would be a colonial successor state, closely aligned with Britain, offering base facilities in return for the promise of strategic protection if it became necessary, altogether a powerful bastion of British and Western influence in a politically volatile region'.[76] Britain was soon called on to honour its commitment to Malaysia. The Republic of Indonesia, under the leadership of Achmaed Soekarno opposed the union and announced a 'state of confrontation' with Malaysia aimed at ending British influence in the area. Britain, Australia and New Zealand gave military support to Malaysia in its attempts to defend itself against Indonesia, whose guerrillas fought intermittently between 1963 and the end of the confrontation in August 1966. Thirty thousand British servicemen were stationed in Malaysia at the peak of the conflict (out of a total of fifty-four thousand on duty in South-East Asia) - the largest commitment of British troops to any one area since the Second World War.[77] The Americans gave Britain verbal support in its campaign in Malaysia but did not offer any military assistance. Instead, it tried to mediate between the parties involved, hoping a diplomatic solution could be found before Indonesia turned to communism.[78]

On arriving in office in October 1964, the Labour government quickly initiated a defence review. Partly this was related to its domestic commitments on health, welfare and education, but it was also a response to a worsening balance of payments problem linked to Britain's high and escalating defence expenditure. In his first budget Chancellor of the Exchequer James Callaghan, announced that defence

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76 Ibid

77 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 23 & pp. 67-8

78 Derek McDougall, "The Malayan Emergency and Confrontation" in Bridge, *Munich to Vietnam.*

costs for the years 1964-69 would be reduced from £2400 million to £2000 million. At the same time, however, the Prime Minister was committed to continuing Britain's global role, including its position East of Suez, indeed declaring in 1965 that Britain's 'frontiers were on the Himalayas'.[79]

The first phase of the defence review lasted from October 1964 to January 1966 and concerned itself with how to achieve economies through its equipment programme, rather than questioning Britain's existing defence commitments. This resulted in the cancellation of three aircraft projects (TSR-2, HS-681 and P-1154). The Defence White Paper of 1966 admitted to some limitations in the future scope of British military operations. Despite this, British ministers were adamant that the British should still be committed East of Suez.[80]

In the summer of 1966 another sterling crisis prompted a second defence review and in July 1967 it reported that a reduction in forces outside Europe was necessary and that withdrawal of forces from Malaysia and Singapore would be required by around 1975.[81] Following yet another deterioration in the balance of payments situation in the autumn of 1967, resulting in the devaluation of the pound, the government announced a further review of public expenditure. The 'Statement on Public Expenditure 1968-9 and 1969-70' contained the 'East of Suez decision'. This historic decision called for an acceleration of the withdrawal from Singapore and Malaysia to be completed by the end of 1971 rather than 1975; undertaking to

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79 Harold Wilson quoted in Darwin, 'Britain's Withdrawal from East of Suez', p. 150

80 Peter Catterall (Ed.), 'Witness Seminar: The East of Suez Decision'. *Contemporary Record,* Vol. 7, No. 3 (Winter 1993), pp. 612-3

81 Ibid, p. 613

withdraw from the Gulf by the same date; and an acknowledgement that Britain no longer planned 'to maintain a special military capability for use in this area.'[82]

Sterling

The British Labour Government that came to power in October of 1964 inherited an economic position that would shape its time in office and have consequences for the wider financial world. It inherited an £800 million balance of payments deficit which threatened sterling and Britain's defence programmes.[83] This parlous situation was made clear the day after Labour's electoral victory in a treasury brief which showed that, despite an apparently healthy economy, imports were rising rapidly and the growth rate lagged behind much of the Western world. The new government took the decision not to devalue the pound and to avoid descent into protectionism. Clearly Wilson's part in the previous Labour Government's decision to devalue in 1949 played a part in this decision - the Prime Minister and his colleagues wanted to avoid Labour being forever linked with devaluation in the minds of the electorate.[84]

Military cutbacks alone were insufficient to deal with the enormous balance of payments problem, and the Wilson Government was forced to take other measures. It placed a 15% import surcharge on all goods excluding food, tobacco and raw materials, raised the bank rate by 2%, and secured a loan from Western banks of $3

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82 Catterall, 'East of Suez Decision'. p. 614

83 Alan P. Dobson, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century (London: Routledge, 1995)*, p. 131

84 It has been argued that prior to the 1964 Wilson and Callaghan were so concerned that they should not be forced into devaluation by the nervous City of London that they sought, and received, an indication from the New York Federal Reserve Bank that they would receive financial backing should the pound come under attack on Labour's electoral victory. See Stephen Dorril & Robin Ramsay, *Smear! Wilson and the Secret State*. (London: Grafton, 1992)

billion.[85] None of these acts avoided a sense of crisis for sterling which faced its first speculative attack in November 1964. From this point onward the pound was under constant attack and Britain faced serious sterling crises in July 1965, July 1966 and in the autumn of 1967. The United States feared that a speculative attack on the pound might then lead to an attack on the dollar - and thus threaten the fundamentals of the Bretton Woods system upon which western financial stability was believed to rest, and so, were resigned to helping sterling by underwriting the pound.[86]

The position of sterling, Britain's defence commitments and the war in Vietnam were issues that could never be separated and indeed the complex interplay between the three burdens is a key feature of Anglo-American relations in the mid to late sixties.

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85 Dobson, *Anglo-American Relations*, p. 132

86 In July 1944 a conference was held at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire and established the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. All currency values would be linked to the American dollar, thus making the dollar the centrepiece of the Liberal economic system.

CHAPTER 2

OCTOBER 1964-DECEMBER 1964: INITIAL PERCEPTIONS

For almost a year before the Labour Government came to office, the British shadow cabinet and the Johnson administration anticipated working together. The Labour Party, and Wilson in particular, had reacted with sadness and genuine grief at President Kennedy's assassination but soon felt comfortable with the prospect of working with the former Vice-President, Lyndon Johnson, not only because of his obvious dynamism but also because they saw him as progressive on social justice. It will become clear, however, that the Labour leadership did not fully understand the new President's personality or his politics, and consequently had unrealistic expectations for the future of Anglo-American relations.

Lyndon B. Johnson's Character and World View

Johnson, as with any other world leader, brought his own personality to bear on the conduct of American foreign relations. While it is impossible to unravel completely the complex interplay between a President's emotions, beliefs, perceptions and predispositions there is much unanimity among those that knew LBJ and those that have studied him, on his personality traits. His political philosophy is less clear. During the 1930s and much of the 1940s he classed himself as a New Deal liberal. Once he became Senator for his conservative home state of Texas in the late 1940s, Johnson felt he had little choice but to temper his liberalism. Throughout the 1950s he responded to the conservatism of the era. Once in the

White House, however, Johnson set out to emulate and out-do Roosevelt and his New Deal. The legislative program he headed was designed to combat poverty and end racial injustice in the hope of achieving a 'Great Society' in the United States.

Johnson was a huge figure both politically and physically. At six-foot three, he used his presence to great effect. He was a skilful manipulator, could exploit others and was often a bully. He was also a domineering and often vulgar person whose political style was based largely on his mastery of interpersonal relations. He thrived on knowing his opponents and allies' strengths and weaknesses; extracting promises and debts to be repaid. This became known as the 'Johnson treatment'. The authors of that term, Richard Evans and Robert Novak, described it as,

> supplication, accusation, cajolery, exuberance, scorn, tears, complaint, the hint of threat. It was all of these together. Its velocity was breathtaking, and it was all in one direction. Interjections from the target were rare. Johnson anticipated them before they could be spoken. He moved in close, his face a scant millimeter from his target, his eyes widening and narrowing, his eyebrows rising and falling.[1]

He was a mass of contradictions: he demanded loyalty of others but was not particularly loyal himself; he could be puritanical in his beliefs yet was known to be unfaithful to his wife, Lady Bird; he had a great personal fortune but regularly pleaded poverty. He was also inconsistent in his treatment of others and could be extremely sensitive to criticism. But above all, Johnson was an energetic activist: his congressional experience was unparalleled. Despite his extremely successful career in politics, however, the Kennedy assassination meant that the shadow of the dead President would always stalk the Johnson White House. The Kennedy image of

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[1] Rowland Evans & Robert Novak, *Lyndon B. Johnson: The Exercise of Power* (New York: Signet Books, 1966), pp. 115-16

youth, style and dynamism underpinned a rapidly congealing Kennedy myth. Johnson paled in comparison to JFK. He did not have the easy wit and charm of Kennedy and had to battle to shake of the image of an 'interloper'. The inconsistencies in Johnson's character would become visible over the course of the Wilson-Johnson years.

Johnson's reputation as a politician who thrived on personal relations meant that the Foreign Office and Wilson's personal advisors recognised that the Prime Minister's ability to forge a friendly, working relationship with Johnson would be an important factor in Anglo-American relations.

Lyndon Johnson's outlook on world affairs fell squarely within the Cold War foreign policy consensus. He believed firmly in the containment policy and as David Barber has commented, 'insofar as he had a philosophy of international relations, it was based on toughness'.[2] It has long been charged that on entering the White House, Johnson was inexperienced in foreign affairs and uncomfortable on the world stage. He certainly had little first-hand experience in high level diplomacy and had travelled relatively little. Johnson apparently often voiced his own uneasiness in foreign affairs, admitting 'foreigners are not like the folks I am used to'.[3] And foreign policy was often a distraction from the President's real love - domestic policy and his Great Society programs. But Johnson was by no means completely ignorant of international affairs. During his time as Senate Majority Leader Johnson had liased with Eisenhower on foreign policy initiatives and had chaired a committee overseeing the Korean war. However, there is no doubt that he was not completely

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[2] James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1992), p. 76

[3] Eric F. Goldman, *The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson* (New York: Dell, 1969), p. 447.

confident in this arena, and was therefore susceptible to the influence of advisers, many of them ex-Kennedy men and drawn from the nation's academic elites. As someone not drawn from the nation's intelligentsia, Johnson also had a weakness for people who provided short and simple answers to complex problems.

LBJ and Vietnam: The Personal Equation

At the height of the Vietnam conflict, the war was so identified with the President that it became known as 'Lyndon Johnson's war'. While that statement-cum-accusation has less currency today, during the mid-to-late sixties the war was seen as the product and tragedy of Lyndon Baines Johnson. Johnson was castigated by both the right and the left for his policy in Vietnam. His critics on the political left felt the President had been wrong to escalate the conflict in July 1965 by introducing American ground forces and was immoral in his prosecution of the war, particularly his sanctioning of the use of gas and napalm. Many on the right attacked Johnson with equal vehemence, mainly for not acting more forcefully in his conduct of the war. By taking the middle ground, by trying to wage a limited war in Vietnam, Johnson managed to alienate a great swath of the American population.

Johnson faced immense personal criticism for a number of reasons. His role as President meant that he was also Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and therefore seen as ultimately responsible for the conduct of the war. Johnson had also assured the American public during the 1964 Presidential election campaign that he would not send any 'boys' to South East Asia. This was part of the reason why Johnson also had a 'credibility gap' in relation to Vietnam: the lies and lack of

openness in the early years of the war meant that the American press and the American public eventually distrusted anything he had to say on it. The war became LBJ's war, not only to the anti-war protestors, but also in his own mind as it came to dominate his time in office. Clearly it eventually destroyed Johnson's plan for his own legacy to the nation - the Great Society. This huge programme of legislation was stymied due to the diversion of funds to the war in South East Asia. Between 1965 and 1973 the Johnson administration spent $15.5 billion on Great Society programs compared to a massive $120 billion on the war in Vietnam.[4] Johnson's interest in the project was also offset by the war. Johnson later lamented,

> I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved - the Great Society - in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programmes ... but if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be an appeaser, and we would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody on the entire globe.'[5]

The war swamped Johnson's daily agenda. He was kept closely informed of day-to-day events in Vietnam, on domestic and international reaction to them, and even got involved in choosing bombing targets.[6] As US casualties mounted and the war bogged down into a stalemate, the President's physical and emotional health clearly suffered. By 1967 he regularly looked white-faced and tired; he was aging prematurely. On 31 March 1968, the day Johnson announced he would not seek

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[4] Vivienne Sanders, *The USA and Vietnam, 1945-75* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), p. 108

[5] Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Signet, 1976), p. 263

[6] Ted Gittinger (Ed.), *The Johnson Years: A Vietnam Roundtable* (Austin: University of Texas, 1993), p. 78

reelection as President, Lady Bird noted in her diary that 'his face was sagging and there was such pain in his eyes as I had not seen since his mother died'.[7]

The Wilson government was therefore faced with a complex President who, after his July 1965 decision to send large numbers of US ground troops to South Vietnam, was increasingly obsessed by events in South East Asia and the consequences of those events back home. If the Wilson government was not involved in this all-important foreign affair, then Anglo-American relations inevitably would be strained during the Johnson administration. Moreover, given LBJ's views on loyalty and his growing paranoia that anyone who did not support him on Vietnam was against him in all things, the Anglo-American alliance appeared constantly threatened if the United Kingdom was not cooperative on this matter.

Harold Wilson's Character and Labour's Foreign Policy

During Wilson's periods in office (1964-70 and 1974-76) - and for many years afterwards - the man and his governments were criticised for their shallowness, lack of achievement and superficiality. Wilson himself was invariably portrayed as a scurrilous, self-serving character with a distinct lack of genuine political beliefs and a dark private side involving a possible sexual relationship with his Personal Secretary, Marcia Williams and dubious links with several business tycoons.[8]

Wilson's career and personality have however experienced a recent reappraisal.[9]

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[7] Lady Bird Johnson, *A White House Diary* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), p. 642

[8] See in particular Paul Foot, *The Politics of Harold Wilson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968) and Andrew Roth, *Sir Harold Wilson: Yorkshire Walter Mitty* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1977). Accusations about Wilson's questionable liaisons with his secretary and business associates are now considered groundless.

[9] Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London: HarperCollins, 1993); Philip Ziegler, *Wilson: The Authorized Life of Lord Wilson of Rievaulx* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993); R. Coopey, S. Fielding, N. Tiratsoo, *The Wilson Governments 1964-1970* (London: Pinter, 1993)

The Wilson who emerges from the latest scholarship is more of a pragmatic, intelligent leader who, while ascribing to no particular political philosophy, had some well-intentioned ideas. Despite this rehabilitation, some of Wilson's less impressive personal characteristics rightly remain intact, particularly his susceptibility to the fantasy world Andrew Roth referred to when he called Wilson a 'Yorkshire Walter Mitty'.[10] Wilson did have delusions of grandeur when it came to his international role.

Wilson, Anglo-American relations and Vietnam

The Labour government that came to power in October 1964 inherited an established policy on Vietnam. The British government, under the Tories, had throughout the 1950s and early 1960s supported the American aim of containing communism in South East Asia and as a loyal ally did so openly. But as the Americans put it, London had decided that it 'must help quietly because of its peacekeeping role under the agreements of 1954'.[11] However, the British refused to become directly involved in the conflict and therefore consistently turned down American requests for troops. This policy of diplomatic support but limited direct involvement became strained when the direction of US policy became increasingly interventionist under the Kennedy administration. Much of British political leadership, including some in the Foreign Office, were doubtful that the US could achieve any sort of military victory in Vietnam and were worried about the increasing risk of Chinese involvement. However, the sanctity of the Anglo-

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10 Roth, *Sir Harold Wilson*

11 Memorandum for the Record by Bundy, 13 February 1964 in Foreign Relations of the United States 1964-68 Volume I, Vietnam 1964 (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1995) [henceforth FRUS] pp. 69-70

American relationship demanded that Britain's true feelings on the conflict could not be made public.

Any new government could, of course, change direction on this issue. Much of the left wing of the Labour party was traditionally anti-American and many within the Party were concerned about the route being taken by the US in Vietnam. Indeed, Wilson's own views on the Anglo-American relationship and on Vietnam changed over time. During the 1950s Wilson had spoken out against American foreign policy in the area. In a speech in Coventry in February 1952, Wilson stated that:

> It must be the duty of the British Parliament, and the British Labour Movement in particular, to make it clear that if any section of American opinion sought to extend the area of fighting in Asia they could not expect us to support it.[12]

And in 1954, at May Day celebrations in Liverpool, Wilson argued:

> Not a man, not a gun must be sent to defend the French in Indo-China. We must not join with nor in any way encourage the anti-Communist crusade in Asia, whether it is under the leadership of the Americans or anyone else .... I believe it is this country which must give the lead to peace-loving nations and see that the world can go forward in peace.[13]

In even stronger language, Wilson said:

> The Government should not further subordinate British policy to America. A settlement in Asia is imperilled by the lunatic fringe in the American Senate who want a holy crusade against Communism .... Asia is in revolution and Britain must learn to march on the side of the peoples in that revolution and not on the side of their

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12 *Daily Telegraph*, 18 February 1952 in Foot, *Politics of Harold Wilson*, p. 203

13 Liverpool *Daily Post*, 3 May 1954 in Ibid

oppressors.[14]

This was during Wilson's brief left-wing phase - his Bevanite period.[15] From the mid-1950s until the early 1960s Wilson, as Shadow Chancellor, became engrossed in domestic and economic issues and 'much of his former antagonism to American foreign policy was transferred to American penetration of the British economy'.[16] When Wilson became Shadow Foreign Secretary in November 1961, he had the opportunity to visit the US more often and to meet its leaders. With the election of John F. Kennedy Wilson saw America in a new light. In an interview after Kennedy's death, Wilson admitted Kennedy's youth and dynamism had influenced him greatly, leading Wilson to believe he could work with a Democratic administration.[17] Perhaps Kennedy's election coincided with Wilson's growing realisation of the vital importance of the United States to the United Kingdom, both in foreign policy terms and economically. Either way, by the time he became Leader of the Opposition in 1963 anti-American statements were no longer part of Wilson's speeches, although he criticised the Tories for their staunch support of American policy in Vietnam. For instance, in the lead up to the 1964 General Election Wilson asked a number of questions on Vietnam in the House of Commons. In June he asked Prime Minister Douglas-Home to confirm that 'we would not support any extension of the war into North Vietnam'.[18] Douglas-Home did not confirm this and,

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14 *Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1954 in Ibid p. 204

15 In April 1951 Wilson, then President of the Board of Trade, followed Aneuran Bevan, Minister of Labour, in resigning in opposition to the Labour Government's plans for defence rearmament and the planned introduction of charges for NHS false teeth and spectacles. Under the influence of Bevan - the only credible left-wing leadership contender - over the next four years Wilson developed his radical instincts. Wilson condemned American foreign policy, particularly arms spending and US accumulation of the world's raw materials. By 1954 Bevan's chance of challenging for the leadership of the Labour Party had diminished and Wilson began to reorient himself towards the centre of Labour politics.

16 Foot, *Politics of Harold Wilson*, p. 205

17 Richard Neustadt, Oral History interview quoted in Pimlott, *Wilson* (London: Harper Collins, 1992) p. 284

18 Hansard, 30 June, 1964, Vol. 697

in the event, Wilson was the Prime Minister who would receive much condemnation for his decision to acquiesce in the continuous American bombing of North Vietnam in March 1965.

The Johnson Administration and the Labour Opposition, January-October 1964

By the beginning of 1964 the Johnson administration, still largely dominated by Kennedy staff, was beginning to anticipate an enlargement of America's presence in South East Asia. Events in Vietnam had become more serious. Ngo Dinh Diem had been assassinated in November 1963 shortly before Kennedy, and South Vietnam was now being run by a succession of military leaders. In early August the Americans alleged that North Vietnamese boats had fired on two of its warships in the Tonkin Gulf. Although it is unlikely that any shots had been fired, this incident gave the Johnson administration the excuse to ask Congress for authority to act in Vietnam. The resulting Tonkin Gulf resolution authorised the President to take 'all necessary measures' to deal with the problems in Vietnam. Within days he had authorised retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam.

At the same, the State Department was continuing to assess 'third party' contributions: assistance from countries other than the United States and South Vietnam. Given left-wing opinion on the war and Wilson's question in the House, Washington was keen to assess the possibility that a Labour Government might prove a less loyal ally than the Conservatives on the issue. Thus a change in government in the United Kingdom could prove significant. Equally, Wilson and his

colleagues were faced with a President who, in terms of political style and personality, was very different from his predecessor.

Anxious to be on good working terms with the Americans, members of the Shadow Cabinet visited Washington throughout 1964. In February Shadow Foreign Secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker, met several senior members of the Johnson administration, partly to prepare the ground for Wilson's planned visit to the US early the following month and partly to meet with their prospective opposition numbers in the US cabinet. Denis Healey, Labour's spokesman on defence, also visited Washington in late March. Vietnam was a major topic of discussion during all three visits and it is clear that at this stage both parties were probing one another on the issue. The Americans wished to reassure themselves that a Labour Government would broadly continue Tory policy on South-East Asia and as America contemplated further escalating their involvement in Vietnam, to investigate the possibility of an increased British contribution - although given Britain's previous reluctance to deploy troops to South East Asia, the Americans were under no illusions about the likelihood of a change in this position. The Labour Shadow Cabinet was of course keen to know of American plans in Vietnam and to gauge how far they might be pushed on this issue, amongst others.

There were lengthy discussions on South East Asia during the Gordon Walker visit in February of 1964. This came shortly after Prime Minister Douglas-Home's visit to Washington, during which he assured the Johnson administration of continuing support of Vietnam in the light of the Tonkin Gulf resolution and the subsequent decision to begin air strikes. In a morning-long talk with Walt W. Rostow, a senior State Department official and well-known 'hawk', one of the main

subjects was Vietnam. Rostow judged 'it was clear that he [Walker] was still getting the facts and making up his mind' but 'did not seem to have ruled out of his thinking some kind of negotiated settlement'. [19] Gordon Walker argued 'from his Moscow conversations, that the USSR at least partially shared our interest in stopping the extension of ChiCom power in southeast Asia'.[20] The belief that Britain could, along with the Russians, mediate between the US and North Vietnam, seems therefore to have been a part of Labour's thinking before the election. Military strategy was also discussed. Gordon Walker asked Rostow if they were 'prepared to put in the "large numbers of troops" which would be required to win the war'.[21] Rostow was not exactly candid on this issue and recorded that Gordon Walker had 'obviously not given much thought to the possibility of other kinds of escalation, except for covert raids on the North Vietnamese coastline'.[22]

Harold Wilson's first serious meeting with President Johnson and his advisers came at the beginning of March 1964. This was Wilson's third trip to the United States since becoming Labour leader. Wilson had met with Kennedy in April 1963 and according to the Americans had 'invited himself to Washington for the funeral in November' where he briefly met Lyndon Johnson.[23] The Americans accurately surmised that Wilson's reason for the March visit was 'to become acquainted with you [Johnson] and your ideas, to enhance his public image in Britain, and to reassure

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19 Memo, Walt W. Rostow to Mr. Tyler, 17 February 1964, Subject: Talk with Patrick Gordon Walker, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas [henceforth LBJL], National Security File [henceforth NSF], Country File, UK, Box 213, File: UK, Meetings with Walker, 2/64

20 Ibid

21 Ibid

22 Ibid

23 Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 1 March, 1964, File: UK, Meetings with Wilson, 3/2/64, NSF, Country File, UK, LBJL

you regarding his reliability as an ally'.[24] Washington awaited the visit 'with considerable interest' and Johnson's officials made in-depth and often accurate appraisals of the leader of Her Majesty's opposition.[25] For example, in an assessment of Wilson for the President prior to his visit, Rusk argued that that the Labour leader was:

> Not a man of strong political convictions himself, he now probably reflects the consensus of Labor Party opinion. He has succeeded in getting the warring factions of the Party to present a public image of unity in face of the common need to win the election.[26]

The Secretary went on to assert that

> Somehow, he does not inspire a feeling of trust in many people. This is his greatest political hardship. It has led some to say that in the next election, the British are faced with a choice between "smart aleck and dumb Alec."[27]

The day before the President's first official meeting with Wilson, McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant for National Security Affairs at the White House, also summed up the Labour leader:

> I think you will find Wilson interesting, affable, persuasive, and seemingly sincere, (although he is widely accused of opportunistic insincerity). His detractors say that he has a photographic memory and can "spout names, dates, and quotations like a champion quiz kid." He is a cold man. ... He enjoys talking.[28]

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[24] Memo, Dean Rusk to the President, 28 February, 1964, File: UK Meetings with Wilson, 3/2/64, NSF, Country File UK, LBJL

[25] *The Times*, 28 February, 1964, p. 10

[26] Memo, Dean Rusk to the President, 28 February, 1964, File: UK Meetings with Wilson, 3/2/64, NSF, Country File, UK, Country File, LBJL

[27] Ibid

In relation to the Americans, Bundy concluded that Wilson's

> political line is friendly to the United States except for reservations appropriate for a Socialist leader and a defender of British national prestige. He insists publicly and privately that Labor will be a more reliable political partner for the United States than the Tories have been.[29]

A later CIA biographic statement also added that:

> Although he has 'flirted' with the left, Wilson is not a doctrinaire socialist. He is above all a pragmatist, well aware of the realities of power. His commitment to Anglo-US relations is not based solely on sentiment.

Commenting on his reputation as 'a cold fish' with 'no close political friends, the CIA noted that 'it is said that he trusts no one completely and vice versa'.[30]

Although this was a largely accurate picture of the Labour leader, some of the less flattering comments may have persuaded LBJ that Wilson was a difficult, devious man who was not to be trusted. In order to get to know Wilson better and perhaps to impress him, the Americans laid on special treatment for the Opposition leader during his visit to Washington, which included a packed, high profile programme. Wilson had meetings with the President, the Secretary of State, and the Defence Secretary, a line-up usually reserved for heads of state. Wilson was accorded the same amount of media coverage as Prime Minister Douglas-Home had

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28 Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, 1 March, 1964, File: UK, Meetings with Wilson, 3/2/64, NSF, Country File, UK, LBJL

29 Ibid

30 CIA Biographic Statement on Harold Wilson, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 213, File: UK, Wilson Visit Briefing Book, 12/64, LBJL

received during his visit to Washington the previous month. As *The Times'* American editor Louis Heren suggested, this equanimity not only emphasized the importance attached to relations with Britain but also revealed 'the eagerness to get to know the man who could be Prime Minister before the end of the year'.[31] This may also have been due to the fact that Wilson had only been in charge of the Labour Party for just over a year. Moreover, in recent months the Johnson administration had recognised that on some issues the Labour Party appeared closer to its position than the Conservative Government. During Patrick Gordon Walker's visit a few weeks earlier, US Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara, had found Gordon Walker's views on defence similar to his own. In the lead up to the General Election the Conservatives had stressed their commitment to an 'independent' nuclear deterrent. In doing so, the Tory leadership had also argued that this allowed them a certain amount of independence from the United States. Labour had seized on this opportunity:

> Here was a chance of appearing to be the party most closely aligned with the United States by arguing for the abandonment of nuclear weapons (a call much loved by the Labour Left) and relying instead on closer relations with the Americans.[32]

Labour began to argue against the nuclear deterrent and for a build-up of more traditional conventional forces. This position was much closer to McNamara's request that the Europeans provide conventional forces for his 'flexible response

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31 *The Times*, 28 February, 1964, p. 10

32 John Baylis, *Anglo-American Defence Relations1939-1980: The Special Relationship*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981) p. 81

strategy'.[33] Not surprisingly, the Johnson administration was eager to assess such possibilities further.

Wilson arrived in Washington for his two day visit on March 1. The Johnson administration impressed upon Wilson similar issues to those emphasized to Prime Minister Douglas-Home. In particular, the Administration was keen to discuss the Multilateral Nuclear Force (MLF), the American proposal for a mixed-man nuclear fleet, that had been formulated in order to deal with German interest in joining the nuclear club. Although the Conservative Government had shown some interest in this plan, the Labour Party was totally opposed to it. However, Vietnam was also brought up during a discussion on South East Asia. At this point, the Johnson administration merely talked of the current political and military situation in Vietnam. This was not a time for requests for help or firm commitments from a prospective Labour government.[34]

This visit was much more important in terms of the personal relationships. Both Wilson and Johnson trusted in their interpersonal skills and would hope to be able to persuade the other on particular issues. The following evening Wilson met Johnson at the White House for 50 minutes. Wilson was reported as saying shortly afterwards that he had got on 'all right' with Johnson and that the conversation had been 'very enjoyable and very frank. There had been no difference of communication or any waste of words'.[35] Back home Harold Wilson's record of this first meeting with Johnson was much more glowing. Many of his political colleagues in Britain were left with an extremely favourable impression of events.

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33 Ibid

34 Memorandum of Conversation, Harold Wilson and Robert S. McNamara, 5 March, 1964, File: UK, Meetings with Wilson, 3/2/64, NSF, Country File, UK, LBJL

35 *The Times*, 3 March, 1964, p. 8

Tony Benn's diary entry of the time states that Wilson 'had got on excellently with President Johnson' and added that he thought they were 'both highly political animals and understand each other well'.[36] The press, however, picked up on some confusion arising out of the Wilson visit. In his endeavour to demonstrate his desire, should he become Prime Minister, to strengthen Anglo-American relations, Wilson apparently voiced his opposition to continued moves towards European unity, seeing Britain's future in strong Anglo-American ties in co-operation with the Commonwealth.[37] Such views were looked upon with suspicion by an Administration who still felt European unity was the best way to prevent political instability on the European continent. Overall, however, Wilson's views were warmly received, particularly his commitment that under Labour Britain would continue its world role.

The following months saw the Labour Party congratulate itself on the prospect of close relations with the Americans. Tommy Balogh, a close adviser to Harold Wilson, visited the White House in April of 1964 and reported back that 'the White House is passionately committed to a Labour victory in Britain - more so than when "that Eastern aristocrat, Kennedy was in charge"'.[38]

Despite the seemingly positive outcome of Wilson's first meeting with the Johnson administration, it was soon apparent to Labour Party observers that the Anglo-American relationship still had its downside, particularly in relation to events

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[36] Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963-1967* (London: Arrow Books, 1989) March 4, 1964, p. 97. Benn, later became a Cabinet member in October 1964 as Postmaster General, and continued to keep a diary. His comments are generally reliable and often extraordinarily perceptive but like all the diaries from this diary-rich government, are also personal. They do, however, give scholars a good sense of how the Wilson-Johnson relationship was perceived at the time. In Benn's case, his belief in the strength of the Prime Minister's relationship with the President may well be to do with his own closeness to Wilson at this time. Later comments which are more critical of Wilson's friendship with Johnson, again, perhaps reflect Benn's growing disdain for Wilson.

[37] *The Times*, 4 March , 1964, p. 9

[38] Benn, *Out of the Wilderness*, 27 April, 1964, p. 106

in Asia. By August of 1964 Benn wryly noted Wilson's reaction to the Tonkin Gulf crisis in Vietnam: 'we are terrified of saying anything that might upset the Americans … The British Government needs American support against Sukarno, who is attacking Malaysia and Wilson is particularly anxious not to upset Johnson at this stage.'[39] In any case, Gordon Walker as Shadow Foreign Secretary had by August come to the conclusion that a Labour Government 'must back [the] US in SE Asia - tho' working slowly for a solution by leaving things to people of the area'.[40]

During the long lead up to the British general election, David Bruce, the US Ambassador in London, continued to keep the Johnson administration informed on the potential new Prime Minister and relevant Labour policies. On July 20, 1964, Bruce described Wilson as 'exceptional in ability, brilliant in debate'.[41] Richard E. Neustadt, a Harvard professor and special consultant to the President during 1964-66, spent time in London during June and July, largely to gauge prospective Labour policy regarding the M.L.F. He was clear that Wilson, if elected, would have his own 'recollections of the Anglo-American relationship' based on his experiences during and shortly after the Second World War and 'hopes for his own personal relationship which are quite different from perceptions of reality held by many American officials'.[42] Johnson had no particular fondness for the British, despite the rhetoric, and obviously did not have the same recollection of his meeting with Wilson. Neustadt therefore felt that 'numbers of things can be done to avoid

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[39] Ibid, 10 August, 1964, p. 135

[40] Papers of Patrick Gordon Walker, GNWR 314 1964 Foreign Policy, "Thoughts on Foreign Policy August 1964", Churchill Archives, Cambridge

[41] Telegram from David Bruce to George Ball, 20 July, 1964, David Bruce Diaries, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond [henceforth Bruce diaries]

[42] Memorandum on The British Labour Party and the MLF, prepared by Richard E. Neustadt, 6 July, 1964, published in the *New Left Review*, No. 51 (1968), pp. 11-21

shocking his sensibilities.'[43] And indeed during Wilson's first two years in office, the Johnson administration attempted to shield the Prime Minister from the President's true feeling for him in order to maintain Wilson's morale at home and his commitment to Anglo-American relations.

A New Labour Government and Anglo-American Relations

On October 16 the Labour Party was declared the winner of the British General Election and asked to form Her Majesty's Government with an overall majority of just five MPs in the House of Commons. On the day of Labour's election victory, Bruce wired Rusk to 'speculate about his [Wilson's] possible attitude toward Anglo-American negotiations'. Bruce's positive appraisal of Wilson continued as he agreed with the charge that Labour's election campaign had been a 'One Man Band': 'As a politician, Mr. Wilson clearly demonstrated his superiority, in intellectual ability, adroitness, and persuasiveness, over his associates.' The Ambassador therefore judged that,

> Wilson's first cabinet will be nothing to brag about in terms either of intellect or of experience. He is aware of this and means to take all key decisions into his own hands. He wants not merely to make ultimate decisions but to pass issues through his own mind early, sitting at the centre of a brains-trusts, with himself as first brains-truster on the model, he says, of JFK.[44]

Bruce expected Wilson to take a key role in foreign affairs and felt that the US should expect 'a greater degree of high level negotiation with the British than has

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[43] Ibid

[44] Ibid, p. 12

been our previous experience'.[45] This analysis proved correct, all Wilson's foreign secretaries complained about Wilson's constant interference in foreign affairs.

President Johnson took Wilson's election as Prime Minister in his stride. Bruce noted that the President 'viewed the results with no surprise, as was his habit whenever anyone came into office who had been previously in opposition' and 'extended ... rather quickly an invitation to Mr. Wilson to meet him'.[46] Also, according to William P. Bundy, brother of McGeorge and Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs,

> No outstanding foreign issues were involved .... So far as American official feelings were concerned, Harold Wilson had made a generally good impression over the year and a half since the death of Hugh Gaitskell, and the change was greeted calmly and with every expectation that the close ties between Britain and the United States would continue.[47]

Bruce anticipated problems over the proposed Multilateral Nuclear Force – to which Labour was opposed - and British entry into the Common Market, but acknowledged America's strength in any such negotiations:

> We will find Mr. Wilson a resourceful, tough, realistic, opinionated bargainer, but solely our own lack of equal resourcefulness and determination would enable him to profit at the expense of our more powerful position.[48]

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[45] Telegram from David Bruce to Dean Rusk, 16 October, 1964, Bruce Diaires

[46] Transcript, David Bruce Oral History Interview, Tape 1, 9 December 1971 by Thomas H. Baker, p. 9, LBJL

[47] Papers of William P. Bundy, Box 1, Chapter 16, p. 2, LBJL

[48] Ibid

The President helped prepare his own country for the change in British government in his foreign policy address to the nation on October 18 just one day after Labour's electoral victory:

> The British Labor Party is the same party that held power when the Atlantic Alliance was founded; when British and American pilots flew the Berlin airlift together; when Englishmen joined us in Korea.
>
> It is a party of freedom, of democracy, and of good faith. Today it has the confidence of the British people. It also has ours. They are our friends - as the Conservatives before them are our friends - and as governments of both parties have been friends for generations. We congratulate the winners. We send warm regards to the losers. The friendship of our two nations goes on. This is our way with all our trusted allies.[49]

The change in British government was accepted uncritically by most of the American press. The *Washington Post* thought the President's 'remarks on Great Britain's change of government were timely and felicitous. The United States and Great Britain have a working relationship that is a party issue in neither country and that is not likely to be disturbed by the outcome of any election'. The *New York Herald Tribune* expected slight differences in policies: 'To the extent that objective realities have determined British policy, they will probably continue to do so, but in details—which could add up to very considerable changes—the United States must be prepared for new adjustments.' Other newspapers, such as the *Baltimore Sun,* were

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[49] Radio & Television Report to the American People of Recent Events in Russia, China, and Great Britain, 18 October, 1964, [686], *Public Papers of the Presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson, Volume II, 1964* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1966), p. 1379

encouraged by the appointment of Patrick Gordon Walker as Foreign Secretary, describing him as 'a man of moderation and a friend of the United States'.[50]

It appears the Americans, certainly within the Cabinet, felt little apprehension at working with a nominally socialist Labour government.[51] Wilson's hostility to American foreign policy was well in the past and his visits to Washington since becoming leader of the Labour Party had convinced most of Washington that his socialist statements were purely for public consumption. Many of those within the Johnson administration knew senior Labour politicians well. Walt Rostow knew Harold Wilson and Denis Healey, the new Defence Secretary from his time as a Rhodes scholar at Oxford. Dean Rusk also knew Healey and was described by David Bruce as having 'a warm feeling for him'.[52] Harlan Cleveland, US Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations, had been one of Wilson's students at University College, Oxford, and most senior British cabinet members had met with officials in the Johnson administration prior to the 1964 election. A healthy working relationship was also facilitated by continuing strong ties between personnel within the American administration and the British civil service. Sir Patrick Dean, British Ambassador to the United States, was admired by Johnson. Sir Michael Palliser, the Prime Minister's Assistant for Foreign Affairs and Walt Rostow, the President's

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50 "Change in British Government", American Opinion Summary, Department of State, 23 October, 1964, File: UK, Walker Briefing Book 10/26-27/64, NSF, Country File, UK, Country File, LBJL

51 It appears the US intelligence community were worried that the Labour Party was headed by a leader who had links to East, notably the Soviet Union, a country Wilson had visited on numerous occasions. Although these trips were made largely on private business, suspicion remained that Wilson was a Soviet mole. James Jesus Angleton, Head of the CIA's Counter-Intelligence Unit firmly believed that Wilson's predecessor, Hugh Gaitskell, had been assassinated by the Soviets in order to get 'their man' in 10 Downing Street. Consequently, the CIA had a file code-named Oatsheaf on Wilson that remained open throughout his time in office. At the CIA's prompting, MI5 also monitored the Prime Minister's activities and investigated his friends and associates in a file named Henry Worthington. See in particular Peter Wright, *Spycatcher* (Australia: William Heinemann, 1987); Stephen Dorril & Robin Ramsay, *Smear! Wilson and the Secret State* (London: Grafton, 1992); David Leigh, *The Wilson Plot: How the Spycatchers and Their American Allies Tried to Overthrow the British Government* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988)

52 David Bruce diaries, 14 April, 1962

National Security Adviser, were old friends from Oxford who enjoyed working together at their respective stations.

At this stage there was little to suggest that Anglo-American relations would falter so much over the coming years.

Patrick Gordon Walker's Visit, October 26-27 1964

With preliminary examinations of one another out of the way, the realities of working together began. Just ten days after Labour's victory at the polls the new Foreign Secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker, 'an old and esteemed friend' of the United States, visited the White House at the invitation of Dean Rusk.[53] Gordon Walker had previously visited the United States in late May and early June 1963, and in February 1964, and had met with President Kennedy, Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara and Roger Hilsman. However, the Americans had no illusions about who would be running Britain's external policy. In a discussion with Gordon Walker, Rusk noted that 'he has worked well with Harold Wilson, but there is no indication that Wilson intends to let anyone other than himself set the major lines of British Foreign Policy'.[54] As such, the Johnson administration wanted to use this opportunity to make sure the Labour Government had 'a clear concept' of United States objectives and policies on key foreign policy issues 'before its own positions solidify'.[55] This was particularly the case in relation to defence matters, especially MLF and Polaris. Rusk told Johnson the main reason for the visit was to 'assure you

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53 Suggested Points for Toast, Secretary's Dinner for Patrick Gordon Walker, 27 October, 1964, File: UK, Walker Visit Briefing Book 10/26-27/64, NSF, Country File, UK, LBJL

54 Memo, Dean Rusk to the President, 24 October, 1964, File: Walker Visit Briefing Book, 10/26-27/64, NSF, Country file, UK, LBJL

55 Ibid

that the United Kingdom does not plan any radical foreign policy initiatives embarrassing to the United States'. A visit so soon after the election would also demonstrate to the British that 'the United States continues to value its association with Britain now that Labor is in control'.[56]

At this point Rusk showed measured optimism about the new British government:

> This could be a turning point in Atlantic affairs comparable, in some ways, to the period 1947-50, when the United States and a previous Labour Government launched other great ventures to strengthen the Atlantic partnership.[57]

At that time, the Labour Government had aligned itself closely to the Americans on such issues as monetary policy, nuclear bases and the H-bomb, largely due to the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin's vehement anti-communism. Perhaps the Americans felt that the British Labour Government, in an attempt to downplay some of the party's anti-Americanism and to demonstrate their credibility as a close friend of the Americans, would be manipulable. The weakening position of the pound would also make the British more susceptible to American pressure.

The Americans therefore intended to push on with Atlantic policy issues such as the Kennedy round of financial talks, MLF, monetary policy and improved political consultation. At this stage MLF was without doubt the most vital issue for the Atlantic Alliance. The importance of MLF was conveyed to Wilson via Walker at the White House meetings. However, it was agreed that:

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56 Ibid
57 Ibid

> Detailed discussion of certain specific questions, such as the MLF and the Polaris Sales Agreement, should be left for a later meeting with Prime Minister Harold Wilson, since he alone can speak with full authority on them.[58]

Nevertheless, Rusk was well aware of Wilson's small working majority and was prepared to take account of it in the coming months:

> We should ... not say anything at this time which might be taken as serving notice on the British that we intend to move ahead with them if they are willing, but without them if necessary. Our position should be one of calm reaffirmation of our commitment to the development of the Atlantic partnership without any overtone of pressure at this stage.[59]

Any strong pressure at this time might have led Wilson to submit to backbench pressure and openly come out against MLF.

Interestingly, on Vietnam, the Johnson administration expected 'no change ... in ... position' because 'the British have firmly supported us in Vietnam, in part as a quid pro quo for support of their effort in Malaysia'.[60] In the minds of the Americans these two issues were inextricably linked. Moreover, despite Labour's criticism of Tory policy on Vietnam and its nominally socialist status, the Americans did not expect the new Government to withdraw British diplomatic support from their actions or be any more sympathetic to North Vietnam. Indeed, William Bundy remembers that:

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58 Ibid

59 Ibid

60 Talking Points Paper on the Far East, File: UK Walker Visit Briefing Book, 10-26/27/64, UK, Country File, National Security File, LBJ Library

> On the most crucial East Asian matter in which Britain was involved, Wilson at once made clear his intent to maintain and if necessary strengthen British help to Malaysia against the Indonesian "confrontation;" there, British forces had been strengthened in September, and during October and November were further increased ...[61]

Prime Minister Wilson's Visit, December 7-8, 1964

Wilson's first visit to Washington in December of 1964 was important on a number of fronts. Although preparatory work had been carried out during the previous month and a half, this visit would see the beginning of the relationship between Wilson and Johnson proper, and would witness the formulation of new policies and the consolidation of old ones.

During this trip, Wilson elaborated on his grand ideas about the future of Anglo-American relations. In his reply to Johnson's welcoming address on 7 December, Wilson was careful in his use of words in describing his hopes for a continued strong relationship with the United States.

> In the changed circumstances of the sixties, we seek still a closer relationship based on common purposes and common aims, on consideration for the interest of Great Britain's partners within the Commonwealth and of our allies in Europe and elsewhere. The theme of these talks, as I conceive them, Mr President, whether for the strength of our alliance or for our wider approach to the fight for a constructive peace is expressed in the one word 'interdependence' - truly as among men so among nations we are all members one of another ...[62]

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61 Papers of William P. Bundy, Box 1, Chapter 16, p. 2, LBJL

62 Remarks at the Welcome at the White House to the New Prime Minister of Great Britain, 7 December 1964, *Public Papers of the Presidents*, p. 1644

Later that day during his toast at the formal dinner, Wilson talked about the responsibilities of friendship:

> We have our differences. There are always differences between friends. We are good enough friends to speak frankly to one another, but there will never be anything peevish or spiteful. If we ever have differences, we will look you straight in the eye - and we will expect you to look us straight in the eye - and say what you would expect we can do as friends and only what we can do as friends.

Wilson continued in his speech by talking of his own up-to-date assessment of Anglo-American relations:

> We hear arguments. I have heard this often enough about whether there is a special relationship between the United States and Great Britain. Some of those who talk of the special relationship, I think, are looking backwards and not looking forward. They talk about the nostalgia of our imperial age. We regard our relation with you not as a *special* relationship but as a *close* relationship, governed by the only things that matter, unity of purpose, and unity in our objectives. We don't come to you at any time on the basis of our past grandeur or of any faded thoughts of what the grandeur was … we have, and we always shall have, a close relationship…[63]

What exactly did Wilson mean by a 'close' relationship with the United States? In practical terms, how distinct was Wilson concept of a 'close' relationship from traditional interpretations of the 'special relationship'?

Despite there being no specific mention of British relations with the United States in Labour's 'Election Manifesto', Wilson had by the time of the General Election decided to reinvigorate Anglo-Americans. Anglo-American relations would

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63 Toasts of the President and Prime Minister Harold Wilson, Ibid, p. 1648

remain at the centre of British foreign policy along with ties to the Commonwealth but would be reenergised. There were two aspects to Wilson's vision of the future of the relationship. Clearly, Wilson hoped to establish a different approach from his predecessors. In the spring of 1964, Wilson had sketched out his hopes for the Anglo-American relationship at a private gathering of press and politicians. According to Tony Benn, Wilson believed 'a Labour Government would be able to establish a much more informal relationship with the American President than Home' had been able to do and 'imagines that he can telephone and fly over as and when necessary, without the usual fuss of top level meetings.... As soon as the Election is over, he and his top colleagues will fly to Washington to renegotiate the whole basis of Anglo-American relations in the field of defence and foreign affairs'.[64] A more informal relationship, utilising the benefits of speedy transatlantic flights and modern communications, based on regular face-to-face meetings and frequent telephone conversations, would ensure the two leaders were up-to-date on each other's thinking. This would help ensure the greatest levels of co-operation between the two countries and maximise Britain's influence on a global basis. Wilson expanded on this aspect of the special relationship at a press conference after his first formal meeting with Johnson at Washington in December.

> It is first a relationship at all levels. President-Prime Minister meetings are essential and should be frequent. There is a good deal to be said for the growing informality which has been developed, so that they tend to be routine and not symbolising any great crisis or dramatic turn of events. It means an equally close relationship between senior British ministers and senior American cabinet officials, particularly Secretary of State,

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64 *Tony Benn diaries*, 5 May 1964., p. 108

Secretary of Defence, and Secretary to the Treasury.[65]

Wilson's ideas about an informal working relationship between Britain and America had been shaped after his meeting with President Kennedy. Invigorated by the President's youth and dynamism, and believing he had established a personal rapport with JFK based on their shared intellectual qualities, Wilson began to believe Anglo-American relations could be more modern and purposive.

As well as hoping for a change in the style and conduct of Anglo-American relations, Wilson desired a change in content. The Prime Minister's emphasis on 'close' rather 'special' relations suggested he envisaged a relationship based on a realistic assessment of Britain's current position in the world; that Britain was no longer a leading world power and was declining in strength year by year. While he hoped for a period of co-operation between the nations, similar to the last time a Labour Government had worked with a Democratic administration, this time a close working relationship would not be founded on the notion of an 'English-speaking alliance' policing and leading the world but would see Britain playing a central role in international peace-keeping. The Labour Government would abandon vain 'nuclear posturing' and instead be more committed to NATO in conventional terms. Thus Labour's 'New Approach' to defence would mean a re-negotiation of the Nassau agreement to buy Polaris missiles from the US and 'the strengthening of our conventional regular forces so that we can contribute our share to Nato defence and also fulfil our peace-keeping commitments to the Commonwealth and the United Nations.[66]

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65 Ian S. McDonald, *Anglo-American Relations since the Second World War* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1974), p. 219

66 Labour Party Manifesto 1964 - Let's Go with Labour for the New Britain

Once in Downing Street, any doubts Wilson might have had about working closely with the Americans became irrelevant. Faced with the true extent of Britain's financial difficulties, the new Prime Minister was probably relieved to find the Americans were as opposed to the devaluation of sterling as he was, and would help to avoid this by providing massive loans to the British. As Paul Foot later put it, 'American loans and promises of loans strengthened what used to be called "the special relationship"'.[67]

However, there were problems with Wilson's hopes for a 'close' Anglo-American relationship, particularly its place in the wider international scene. In the summer of 1964, Richard Neustadt had warned the Johnson administration about the dangers of Labour's 'Dreams of Glory (retrospective)':

> Their vision of the place and power in the world which they hope to assume as HM Government has rather more to with 1951 than 1964, judging by the overtones when they discuss their prospects. Many of the educative shocks which Tories and officials have encountered in the interim do not seem to have registered in full on these outsiders.[68]

In Wilson's case, Neustadt felt that this would manifest itself in 'dreams of a role as honest broker in East-West relations (shades of 1945). Currently he is 'the man who knows Krushchev.'[69] Neustadt was also correct, however, in sensing Wilson's hope that Britain could mediate between Washington and Russia. This was very much grounded in his belief in the Prime Minister's own talents and experience, particularly his long-term relationship with the Russians and his sense of his own

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67 Foot, *The Politics of Harold Wilson*, p. 212

68 Memorandum on The British Labour Party and the MLF, pp. 11-21

69 Ibid

interpersonal skills.[70] If the Wilson Government could establish a strong relationship with the Americans, it could help make the Cold War world more peaceful.

The difficulty with this notion was Britain's declining importance in world affairs: Britain simply did not have the strategic or military significance to bring either of the superpowers to heel. In the absence of this political 'muscle', the only way for Wilson to play the role of power he so desired, was to establish an intimate working and personal relationship with President Johnson. The difficulty for Wilson here was Johnson's lack of enthusiasm about working with the Europeans in general. The President did not want a close working alliance with Britain, nor with any other European nation for that matter.[71] Although Europe remained the first priority for US foreign policy and Presidential commitment to NATO was as strong as ever, Johnson had no new initiatives on Europe. Indeed, George Ball, admits that he took the lead on European policy and in general did not get much interference or guidance from Johnson in this.[72] Johnson clearly felt more at home with Latin American and Asian nations. His personal experience as a teacher of young, poor Mexican-Americans meant he felt he understood the problems of under-developed nations. His Presidential visits reflected this preference; overseas trips concentrated largely on the Western Hemisphere and the Far East. So, although Johnson recognised the unique nature of Anglo-American relations in terms of language, culture and tradition, he did not see them as 'special' in any real sense, due to Britain's decline as a great power and the rise in importance of other European nations, particularly West

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[70] Wilson had since the 1940s visited the Soviet Union, sometimes on official visits but also establishing trading links for Montague Meyer.

[71] Frank Costigliola, 'LBJ, Germany, and the "End of the Cold War"' in Warren I. Cohen & Nancy Bernkopf Tucker (Eds.), *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-1968* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 174

[72] Transcript, George W. Ball Oral History Interview, 7 July 1971 by Paige E. Mulholland, Tape II, p. 17, LBJL

Germany. He was also suspicious of the East-Coast foreign policy establishment's Anglophilia, describing some of his advisers as 'dangerously sympathetic to the UK'.[73]

This lack of concern for, or empathy with, the British could be explained by Johnson's personal sense of geography. William McChesney Martin, while Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, recalled to the journalist Henry Brandon what he thought were Johnson's true feelings towards England:

> First of all you have to know that he does not consider easterners ... as real Americans. To him they look too much to Europe. Secondly, the line of Texas, Missouri, Minnesota to him is the real America. Those Texans who have gone to live in California are in his mind Texans who weren't able to make a go of it in Texas. In this picture, England figures about as large as North Dakota.[74]

The main problem Wilson faced in trying to effect changes in the Anglo-American relationship was Johnson himself. How likely was it that the two leaders could develop a close working and personal relationship? When Wilson had met Johnson in March Tony Benn concluded, 'Johnson is an old style, folksy, warm-hearted New Dealer with much more in common with Wilson than Kennedy had or than he (Johnson) has with Home. All that is very encouraging.'[75] Clearly the two leaders main shared personal characteristic was their total absorption in politics and for that reason they had a great deal of respect for one another as professional politicians. And perhaps Johnson also felt that Wilson was, like himself, not a part

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73 "Memorandum for the Record", 31 March 1965, NSF, Files of McGeorge Bundy, Box 18/19, LBJL

74 Henry Brandon, *Special Relationship. A Foreign Correspondent's Memoirs from Roosevelt to Reagan*, London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 204.

75 Tony Benn diaries, 27 April, 1964

of his country's ruling establishment.[76] They certainly had relatively humble origins: Johnson's comfortable, rural background in the Texas hill country and Wilson's, lower-middle class upbringing in northern England meant both had no more than a middling social status. However, Johnson's high school education was in marked contrast with Wilson's academic success as an Oxford don and although they may have come from modest backgrounds, they had not had similar life experiences and, apart from politics, had no shared interests. But Benn's conclusion may also have been a misreading of Johnson and his politics, something of which Wilson was also guilty as Henry Brandon noted:

> Like other Labour leaders, he was under the mistaken impression that there was little difference between a New Dealer and a British socialist. To him the Great Society was another way of talking about Labour's kind of socialism when in effect Johnson's approach to the welfare state did not prevent his being closer to business than to the labor unions.[77]

Wilson may therefore have assumed a closer political affinity than was in fact the case.

Moreover, Johnson would increasingly judge his friends by their loyalty on Vietnam. It is no coincidence that of all the world's leaders, Johnson had the greatest respect for Australia's Premier Harold Holt. To the President, Holt had admirably supported the Americans, and had honoured its SEATO alliance obligations by sending combat troops to Vietnam.

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76 Stewart Alsop, "The Interesting Mr. Wilson", *The Economist*, December 1964.

77 Brandon, *Special Relationship,* p. 209

Johnson's international priorities and personal demands were not clear in December 1964. At this stage, the Prime Minister's plan for closer relations between Britain and American was still intact. And as the personal dimension was an important forerunner to such a development, it was crucial that Wilson's first meeting with Johnson, as Prime Minister, go well. The Americans were also worried about this aspect of the Wilson talks, although perhaps for different reasons. On 25 November, Richard Neustadt was sent to London to ensure both sides were fully prepared for Wilson's forthcoming visit to Washington and to make it transparent 'that the success of the talks would be dependent on the acceptance of MLF.'[78] George Ball, Under-Secretary of State, reiterated this during a visit to London. Ball met with Wilson with the purpose of ascertaining the Prime Minister's views on an Atlantic nuclear force.

However, it is clear that Neustadt also wanted to stress the importance of the 'personal equation' in the forthcoming talks between the President and the Prime Minister. Wilson was reluctant to see Neustadt, fearing such a meeting would mean 'letting the Americans have a clear insight' into British views ahead of time.[79] Derek Mitchell, the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary, also met with Neustadt and recorded afterwards that Neustadt 'repeated the warning already given by him to the Prime Minister and others that the Prime Minister should not bank on everything going his way when he got face to face with the President.' He added that 'the President was not looking forward to the talks with anything approaching the same eagerness as the Prime Minister because 'he had other problems on his mind, for example South-East Asia and a number of personnel matters. Thus preoccupied

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78 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 46

79 Jo Wright to J.N. Henderson, 12 November, 1964, PREM 13/108, PRO

he looked forward to next weekend as more of a chore than a major act of policy'. All this indicates that even at this early stage misunderstandings were already evident in the relationship between the Prime Minister and the President. Neustadt made this clear when he explained that:

> It was known that the Prime Minister had received a strong impression from his personal meeting with the President which he had when he was Leader of the Opposition; and that he had been moved by the warmth of the message which was sent to him when he took up office. But the President himself had not the same recollection of the earlier meeting and the warm message of greeting was not more than the result of an instruction to officials to draft a warm message of greeting.[80]

Derek Mitchell thought this assessment was a 'little one-sided' and moved on the offensive by explaining that,

> it was a fact that the Prime Minister assumed he had a personal affinity with the President and if he were disabused of this in too rude or unfeeling a way he might take it very hard. I said that I hoped that he would not look at this problem exclusively as one of conditioning the Prime Minister to the President. The opposite approach, difficult as it might be for Professor Neustadt and his colleagues in Washington, might pay handsome dividends.

This advice may have been taken on board, especially when one considers the lavish attention paid to Wilson on his visit to Washington. Mitchell summed up the conversation by saying that throughout the talk Neustadt's 'emphasis was on the importance of the personal relationship and of making sure that there was no misfire or recoil as a result of the confrontation.'[81]

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[80] Note of a Conversation with Professor Neustadt and D. Mitchell, Prime Minister's Visit to Washington, Top Secret, PREM 13/193, PRO

[81] Ibid

Wilson undoubtedly received a great deal of advice - from a variety of sources - on his forthcoming visit to Washington. Apart from the Foreign Office and private secretaries, the Prime Minister was also overwhelmed with correspondence from members of his cabinet and party and indirect advice from editors and journalists. In his political memoirs, *The Labour Government 1964-70*, Wilson records that an 'ominous note' came from a British newspaper editor who had recently met Johnson in Washington.

> President Johnson had told the editor that he would never trust a British Prime Minister again, because all his experience showed their Washington visits to be concerned mainly with domestic electioneering.[82]

This may have been partly due to Johnson's disagreement with Prime Minister Douglas-Home during his visit to Washington in February of that year. Johnson had been furious after the visit of Douglas-Home when the latter had by accident led the press to believe that he had acted firmly in response to American criticism about British trade with Cuba. The President was livid at the imputation that he had allowed an allied leader, of diminishing international significance, to speak to him in such a manner, and apparently, Johnson never spoke to Douglas-Home again. No such mistakes would be made with Wilson. Throughout the Wilson-Johnson years, the Americans were particularly careful to monitor the Prime Minister's public statements and actively sought to influence them.

In addition to this, Johnson apparently took a moral stand against Wilson and examined the question of his being a security risk after being furnished with

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82 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 46

intelligence reports during the British General Election telling of Wilson's supposed affair with his secretary, Marcia Williams. These reports appear to have originated in Britain and were picked up by the FBI's London mission. Charles Bates, the FBI legal attaché in London at the time, asserts that information surrounding Wilson's supposed liaison with his secretary were received by FBI Chief, J. Edgar Hoover and duly passed on to President Johnson.[83] The same rumours were passed on to McGeorge Bundy via Richard Helms, the CIA's Deputy Director of Plans.[84] In an Oval Office meeting with the President and his advisers shortly before Wilson's December visit, David Bruce also noted that such gossip was in circulation:

> The President made no allusion to what I had been confidently told was his prejudice against the Prime Minister, founded largely on gossip that the latter had conducted an irregular sexual connection with his secretary. This allegation had been muttered in certain circles during the campaign; Al Irving queried the Chief Whip—now Lord Bowden on the subject. He received the assurance that the lady's husband would not bring a suit against Wilson, naming as co-respondent, since the husband had been divorced, remarried, and was the father of a child of his second venture. Johnson is said to be puritanical in his views about such affairs, and heartily to disapprove of them.[85]

Given Johnson's own marital infidelities, the hypocrisy of such a judgement is striking. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Johnson would have felt more confident in the knowledge that he had such information at his fingertips, especially given his axiom 'I never trust a man unless I have his pecker in my pocket'.[86] Johnson was well aware of James Jesus Angleton's concern that Wilson was a Soviet

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83 Leigh, *Wilson Plot*, p. 69

84 Dorril & Ramsay, *Smear*, p. 56

85 Bruce Diaries, December 5, 1964

86 Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 319

agent and although the President does not appear to have taken this intelligence too seriously, as the CIA continued to pass information on Wilson to the President and his closest advisers, particularly regarding his relationship with the Russians, such poison may partly explain why the President's attitude to Wilson changed periodically.[87]

In any case, Johnson was not prepared to have Williams accompany the Prime Minister to Washington and there was certainly some controversy over this issue.

George Ball remembers that,

> on Wilson's first visit to President Johnson in Washington ... relations got off to a bad start over the Prime Minister's insistence that his assistant, Marcia Williams, attend highly restricted meetings; she did not, in Johnson's view, have the rank to justify it.[88]

Williams remembers the event somewhat differently.

> The reason I was not taken on that first visit was mainly that the Principal Private Secretary had worries because never before had anybody political been taken abroad with the Prime Minister. It is difficult to tell if this view was accurate. But for another visit Derek Mitchell did helpfully suggest that I might have been able to go on the plane in the capacity of a 'maid' if Mrs Wilson was on the trip.[89]

In the event Wilson was accompanied to Washington by the Foreign Secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker, Defence Secretary, Denis Healey, the Secretary of the Cabinet, Burke Trend, and by senior Foreign Office and Defence officials. The visit

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87 See Wright, *Spycatcher* and Dorril & Robin Ramsay, *Smear*

88 George W. Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern - Memoirs* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982) p. 336

89 Williams, *Inside No. 10* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), p. 40

took place from Sunday 6 December to Wednesday 9 December and on the surface 'with Sir Winston Churchill day just over, good will for Britain' was 'running high'.[90] Privately, however, the difficulties in planning and preparation for the trip, meant that uneasiness surrounded Wilson's first visit to Washington as Prime Minister.

On Wilson's arrival at the White House on December 7, President Johnson gave his traditional remarks of welcome on the South lawn. Wilson responded in much greater detail and as John Freeman noted in the *New Statesman,* the Prime Minister's long-windedness was perhaps a danger to the future of Anglo-American relations:

> There was a brief moment on Monday morning in the pale icy sunshine of the White House garden, when it seemed as if a new and unexpected objective of British policy was being revealed. To kill the President of the United States by exposure. The Prime Minister had been given the full red-carpet treatment: a 19-gun salute, a presidential reception, guards of honour, and a briefly graceful speech of welcome from President Lyndon Johnson, who faced the near-freezing atmosphere coatless. Harold Wilson, in a heavy greatcoat, stepped to the microphones and plunged into a portentous address about the purpose of his mission. It lasted nearly 10 minutes. Well before the end the assembled dignitaries were discreetly shuffling to restore their circulation. The President looked stoically blue with cold. And a little peeved. It seemed an ill-starred beginning to such important talks with such a sensitive man.[91]

Given Johnson's undoubted ultra-sensitivity, Freeman was probably correct.

In Wilson's account of the visit, he notes that during their first private meeting which lasted from 11.30 am to 1 pm, the President started by repeating 'that after his

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90 *The Times*, 7 December, 1964, p. 10

91 John Freeman, *New Statesman*, 11 December, 1964, p. 916

previous experience he had come to the conclusion that he would never trust a British Prime Minister again'. Wilson said that he understood what Johnson meant and that he personally would 'say nothing outside the White House that I had not said to him inside'.[92] The fact the President began their first formal meeting with such a warning is clear evidence of Johnson's intimidating style. Wilson was immediately put on the defensive.

Getting down to business, Johnson and Wilson's talks were dominated by three major issues: MLF, sterling, and Vietnam. Their discussion of such issues was, however, prefaced by talk of their respective domestic political problems. Wilson felt that the President did not fully understand the British political system, especially the problem of governing with a small majority.

> His political reputation had been built up by his success as Senate majority leader with, at times a small, and always unreliable, majority, so he felt that he understood the problems facing our parliamentary leadership. It was harder for him to see that while failure to carry a vote in the Senate did not mean the end of a presidency, which was secure for a four-year period, a serious parliamentary defeat might mean the end of the Government, or at least an immediate general election.[93]

This may account for Johnson's later inability to comprehend fully Wilson's difficulties in dealing with backbench dissent over Vietnam. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that Johnson's interpretation of this discussion of domestic politics was somewhat different from Wilson's, again suggesting some problems with

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92 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 47

93 Ibid, pp. 47-48

communication. In a debriefing of the conversation Johnson conveyed the following to McGeorge Bundy:

> The President pointed out to the Prime Minister that there were a lot of problems which did not show in the U.S. returns, especially with respect to international affairs. He said that our folks were damned tired of being told that it was their business to solve all the world's problems and do so mainly alone and that he was very wary of taking any tall dives that might get him into the situation Roosevelt got into in 1937. [94]

There was no mention of Wilson's parliamentary difficulties. Such Wilsonian concerns did not register as important to Johnson when compared with his own foreign policy anxieties. Nevertheless, Wilson and Johnson undoubtedly enjoyed talking to one another about the management of politics.

The discussion then moved onto the major problem facing Anglo-American relations at that time: sterling. As well as introducing a 15% surcharge within days of coming to office, the Wilson government had increased the bank rate by 2% on 23 November. Johnson's own budget had been affected by British demands for help with sterling and the Administration acknowledged that 'problems for the pound would also be problems for the dollar'.[95] Consequently the President was blunt in analysis of the dangers of a British devaluation but kind about the problems sterling caused the Prime Minister.

Later in the afternoon a full meeting between the Prime Minister, President and their respective senior colleagues, advisers and note-takers took place in the Cabinet room of the White House. At this full-scale meeting Vietnam was discussed

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[94] Memo for the Record, from the President to McGeorge Bundy, 7 December, 1964, NSF, Files of McGeorge Bundy, File: Memos for Record (Meetings with Pres., etc) 1964, LBJL

[95] Ibid

seriously for the first time. The Americans had, however, put much thought into the subject before the visit and indeed the British, New Zealand and Australian embassies had been informed a few days earlier that the prospect of 'more serious decisions made it more than ever vital' that the US 'have increased third country contributions.' It was suggested the UK increase its number of police advisors.[96] Moreover, pre-empting the Wilson visit, McGeorge Bundy indicated to the British that the President had a 'deep personal concern' on this, and that he would 'discuss this with Wilson.'[97]

In a memo to Johnson two days before the Wilson visit, Bundy outlined the difficulties surrounding the issue of 'The British and Vietnam'. He told the President that 'the British will find it very, very difficult indeed to increase their commitment in Vietnam right now' because of a lack of political support for any such action. He went on to point out that in a sense it was now too late to start expecting serious support from the British because:

> For 10 years we have accepted a situation in which the British give political support, but avoid any major commitment on the ground of their other interests and their position as Co-Chairman of the Geneva Agreements of 1954.... It is hard to treat a thing as our problem for 10 years and then try to get people to take a share of it, just because it is getting worse (though we choose not to say so).

Bundy still felt it was worth hitting the British 'hard' while in Washington but recognised that a 'definite and affirmative answer' was unlikely. He also acknowledged that at present:

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96 Telegram from Rusk to US Embassies in London, Canberra and Wellington, 4 December, 1964, LBJ Library in Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: A History in Documents* (New York: New American Library, 1981), p. 289/290

97 Ibid

the most that Wilson could possibly do ... would be a slight enlargement of the Thompson advisory mission and of their police training effort, with perhaps a green light to a few bold British officers to get themselves in the line of fire as our men do. All this he would have to do quietly....You might press him to go from the current level of 7 Britishers to about a hundred, but we would be lucky to get 50 in this first phase.

In relation to a possible second phase of the conflict entailing the need 'to land a mixed force of U.S. and other troops', Bundy felt that 'we might conceivably get a small British contingent along with larger ones from Australia and New Zealand'. He judged that this request might succeed because 'our own commitment would have gone up and there would be a better case for asking the British to join in'. However, Bundy was clearly aware of the ambivalent position of the British due to their role as Co-Chair of the Geneva Conference and the dangers inherent in any commitments on their part: 'if the British Co-Chairman send troops in, that might be the trigger, or at least the excuse, for the Soviet Co-Chairman to help Hanoi in a similar manner'.[98]

According to the official British record of the meeting, the President introduced Vietnam in connection with the importance of Britain's world-wide role. He suggested that 'there were ... places where a United Kingdom military presence, on however a limited scale, might have a significant effect. A few soldiers in British uniforms in South Vietnam, for example, would have a great psychological and political significance'.[99] Wilson notes in his memoirs that the President's request for a token British force in South Vietnam was made 'without excessive enthusiasm'.[100]

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98 Memo to the President from McGeorge Bundy, Subject: "The British and Vietnam", 5 December 1964, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 214, PM Wilson Visit (1), 12/7-8/64, LBJL

99 The Prime Minister's Visit to the United States and Canada, 6-10 December, 1964, Top Secret, PREM 13/104, PRO

100 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 79

The Cabinet record agrees that 'there was no real United States pressure for a United Kingdom presence on the ground in South Viet-Nam, apart from an initial suggestion that we should contribute a token force of 100 men'.[101] While the Prime Minister acknowledged the parallels between the US problem in Vietnam and the British problem in Malaysia, and emphasised the existing British help in Vietnam, which included the Thompson mission, the training of Vietnamese troops in jungle warfare, and the provision of police officers in Saigon, he explained that the British could not offer a troop contribution because:

> We were co-chairman of the Geneva conference, under the Agreements of 1954 and 1964, and would have a role to play in seeking a way to peace. But I stressed the fact also, which seemed new to him, that we had as many as fifty-four thousand troops in Malaysia.[102]

These two main arguments against the sending of British troops to Vietnam - that the British were already over-stretched in the Far East through their commitment of troops to the Malaysian struggle against Indonesia and that the British position as Co-Chair of the Geneva Conference precluded any active military involvement in South Vietnam - would continue to be Wilson's main line of defence against the Johnson administration's requests for allied help. In themselves, the arguments were reason enough not to get involved and provided a convenient mask behind which Wilson could hide his own feelings of apprehensions about US involvement in Vietnam.[103] The Johnson administration was not convinced by either argument.

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101 North American Visit, Notes for Cabinet, PREM 13/104, PRO

102 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 79

103 Johnson described Wilson's argument that he could not send troops to Vietnam without jeopardising the British position as Geneva Co-Chair as as a 'fig-leaf'. "Briefing Book 7/29/66", NSF, Country File, UK, Box 215/6, LBJL

After the Soviet Union began supplying arms and aircraft to the North Vietnamese in 1965, Washington could not see why Britain continued to remain so sensitive over its role as Co-Chair. If the Wilson government believed in the wisdom of America's objectives in Vietnam, then the Americans could not see how a small troop deployment could add significantly to the British military burden around the world. In addition to such practical reasoning against British involvement in Vietnam, a domestic political one would soon become equally, if not more important: the unpopularity of the war in Britain, particularly within Wilson's own party. Even if the Prime Minister had wanted to send a token force to Vietnam, his Party would not have allowed it.

Wilson therefore 'accepted no new commitment apart from offering to do a little more training in Malaysia' and instead pursued the possibility of a British role in the initiation of peace negotiations. William Bundy recorded that the Americans discussed such issues with 'great frankness'.[104]

That evening at a state dinner in the White House, President Johnson delivered a toast to the Prime Minister. Things were sufficiently relaxed for LBJ to deliver one of his famous jokes on the subject of the present talks.

> Mr Prime Minister, I want you know that I am really enjoying them, although sometimes diplomatic negotiations recall Mark Twain's story of his visit to a friend up in New Hampshire.
>
> Mark Twain was walking along the road and he asked a farmer, "How far is it to Henderson's place?"
>
> "About a mile and a half," the farmer answered.
>
> He walked awhile longer and he met another farmer and he asked

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[104] Papers of William P. Bundy, Box 1, Chapter 19, pp. 21/22, LBJL

> the same question, "How far is it to Henderson's place?" The farmer answered, "About a mile and a half."
>
> Mark Twain walked a little farther and he met a third farmer and He again asked, "How far is it to Henderson's place?"
>
> "About a mile and a half," the farmer answered."Well," said Twain, "Thank God I am holding my own."[105]

He continued with another of his humorous anecdotes. 'We have many difficult problems. I am sure the traditional British ability to find reasoned solution will ultimately prevail. During World War II the British Minister in Algeria was called upon to mediate a dispute between British and American officers. The American officers wanted drinks served before their meals. The British wanted their drinks served after their meals. He came up with this answer: "In deference to the British," he said, "we will all drink after meals and in deference to the Americans, we will all drink before the meal." This kind of British genius has solved a great many problems.'[106] The sound recording of this event indicates much laughter at this point.[107] Despite the inauspicious start and Wilson's refusal to send troops to Vietnam, the relationship between the two leaders and their respective administrations, appears to have been relaxed. Basking in his landslide victory in the 1964 Presidential Election by the biggest margin to that point in US history, Johnson was confident and self-assured in December 1964. Working hard on his plans for a 'Great Society', he was in his element, using his dynamism and enthusiasm to good effect. At this point, Vietnam was still a troubling problem, but had not yet overwhelmed the President's every thought and deed.

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105 Toasts of the President and Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, 7 December 1964, Public Papers of the Presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson, p. 1645

106 Ibid

107 Audio Cassette, "The Humor of LBJ: 25th Anniversary Edition", LBJ Museum Store Production, Austin, Texas, 1989

Nonetheless, at the final meeting between the President and the Prime Minister, with the Secretary of State, Foreign Secretary and Secretaries of Defence in attendance, Vietnam was discussed in further detail. Rusk talked about assistance from other countries 'both for its practical effect as well as for the political impact, to demonstrate to Saigon and Hanoi the degree of free world solidarity'. He then expressed the US government's hope that the UK would 'put people into the countryside. Engineers, technicians and military were needed … Showing the flag was important.' Rusk didn't just want a small contigent of British advisors, as with the Thompson mission, but 'a significant number of people'.[108] The British contingent repeated its support for the American policy in Vietnam but again reminded the Americans of Britain's efforts against communism in Malaysia. Obviously responding to Rusk's comments about the displaying of the British flag, Gordon Walker admitted that publicizing British efforts, such as training Vietnamese troops in jungle warfare and providing medics 'would in fact step up the British commitment'. The British concluded the discussion on Vietnam by reminding the Americans that they needed to be 'consulted about steps contemplated in Vietnam so that they could support U.S. efforts effectively'.[109]

The British left Washington feeling moderately pleased with themselves. Not only had Wilson managed to successfully put forward his alternative to MLF, the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF) but had also secured some sympathy and understanding on sterling and had avoided any major commitment on Vietnam. The

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108 Record of a Meeting held at the White House on Tuesday, 8 December, 1964, at 3.45 p.m., The Prime Minister's Visit to the United States and Canada, December 6-10, 1964, PREM 13/104, PRO

109 Memorandum of a Conversation, White House, Washington, 8 December 1964, 4 pm in FRUS 1964, p. 985

Prime Minister's convinction that a strong, forward-looking Anglo-American relationship was central to British interest, remained intact.

Deals?

At this first meeting there is no substantive evidence that there was any deal or understanding reached between the British and American governments linking American financial support of the pound, a British commitment to remain East Suez, and a wider deal involving Vietnam. However, there could have been two other possible arrangements. The first may have related to MLF. In managing to persuade Johnson to consider abandoning the unpopular MLF Wilson may have agreed to a quid pro quo which tied the British to the US on Vietnam. Wilson's Chief Whip, Edward Short, endorses this theory. Short argues that Wilson 'paid a price - a high price' for American acceptance of Wilson's ANF.[110] Certainly as early as July 1964 Neustadt discussed South East Asia as a place 'where the US might be threatened or the UK rewarded in the course of bargaining over MLF'.[111] It is clear, however, that Wilson's 'success' over MLF was not as great a personal victory as it first appeared. Prior to the December visit, McGeorge Bundy, spelt out in a memo to Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara and George Ball, his reservations about the cost of success on MLF, including 'a deeply reluctant and essentially unpersuaded Great Britain' and a 'protracted and difficult Congressional struggle in which we would be largely deprived of one decisive argument - that this arrangement is what our major European partners really want'. Moreover, Bundy also revealed that,

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110 Edward Short, *Whip to Wilson* (London: Macdonald & Co., 1989), p. 96

111 Memo on British Labour Party and the MLF, 6 July, 1964.

> From my own conversations with the President, I am sure that he does not feel the kind of personal Presidential engagement in the MLF itself which would make it difficult for him to strike out on a new course if we can find one which seems better. I believe we can.[112]

It would appear, therefore, that while Wilson may have felt victorious over the likely scrapping of MLF, it was a smaller sacrifice for Johnson than the Prime Minister realised. And, while Wilson may have received much favourable publicity over this, Johnson may have felt it was worth it if it made Wilson obliged to him, especially on Vietnam.

The second 'arrangement' could have been a straight deal regarding US support for the British in Malaysia in return for British assistance over Vietnam. In many ways, this was a continuation of established policy. As early as February of 1964 the link between the situations in Malaysia and Vietnam had been established.[113] O.G. Forster, a diplomat at the British Embassy in Washington explained in July of 1964 that,

> the link is not in the form of 'if you will help us in Malaysia, we will help you in Laos and Vietnam', ... Rather it is in the self-evident parallel between the two situations. It is very difficult for the Americans to urge us not to indulge in mild escalation in Eastern Malaysia, when they are seeking to persuade us that this is the correct policy in Laos and Vietnam; it is very difficult for them to argue that we should not take the Malaysian question to the United Nations, when this has been under consideration for Vietnam and Laos for the very same reasons; it is very difficult for them to urge that a Conference

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[112] Memo, Bundy to Rusk, McNamara, and Ball, 25 November 1964, "McGeorge Bundy, 10/1-12/31/64" folder, Box 2, Memos to the President, quoted in Paul Y. Hammond, *LBJ and the Presidential Management of Foreign Relations* (Austin: University of Texas, 1992)

[113] O.G. Forster, British Embassy, Washington D.C., to J.E. Cable, South East Asia Department, Foreign Office, 7 July, 1964, FO371/75063, PRO

> of the countries concerned will solve everything, when they are resisting another Geneva Conference for the same purpose.[114]

In a briefing paper for Wilson's December visit to Washington, the Foreign Office wrote of an 'element of reciprocity in the support extended by each Government to the policies of the other'. This support was, according to the Foreign Office, 'implicit in the communiqué issued on February 13, 1964 after Sir Alec Douglas-Home's visit to President Johnson'. The relevant passage being:

> The Prime Minister re-emphasized the United Kingdom support for United States policy in South Viet-Nam. The President re-affirmed the support of the United States for the peaceful national independence of Malaysia.[115]

This section of the communiqué had only been inserted after careful consideration. In the McGeorge Bundy memo two days prior to the Wilson visit, the President had been advised that 'the reciprocal price' of any British force in Vietnam

> would be stronger support on our side for Malaysia and perhaps closer participation in naval and air deployment designed to cool off Sukarno. This kind of bargain in this part of the world makes a good deal of sense, and Rusk and McNamara will be ready to go forward with the British in detailed discussion on this basis.[116]

However, while there may have been an implied agreement to support each other in South East Asia, William Bundy casts doubts on the direct nature of any agreement:

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[114] Ibid

[115] "Malaysia and Vietnam. British and American Commitments and Undertakings", FO 371/175095, PRO

[116] Memorandum to the President from McGeorge Bundy, 5 December, 1964, NSF, Country File, UK, Prime Minister Wilson Visit (1) 12/7-8/64, Box 214, LBJL

> There is no truth whatever, I am sure, in the idea that the Johnson Administration agreed at any time with any British government for a kind of sharing of the military burden—no American forces in Malaysia (never for a moment contemplated in any case) and no British forces in Vietnam.[117]

Before the Wilson visit, the CIA advised the White House that given the UK's heavy commitment in Malaysia,

> should they be pressed to increase their participation [in Vietnam], they will probably insist on a quid pro quo with respect to Malaysia … we will end up undertaking a bigger commitment (both military and political) in Malaysia than we would like – a commitment [sic] which would, in the event, outweigh the usefulness of an increased British role in Vietnam.

British visibility in Vietnam would, according to this assessment, be most usefully gained by publicizing the work of the British Advisory Mission.[118] McGeorge Bundy, Rusk, McNamara and the President disagreed with the assessment, instead believing a slightly increased US role in Malaysia might be a cost worth paying for a more substantial UK presence in Vietnam.

Although Rusk raised the possibility of a 'joint venture' between the US and UK in Malaysia and Vietnam, Wilson and Gordon Walker did not bite. So, in a sense, the December meeting saw an agreement between the US and the UK that each country would only give the other limited support in their respective South East Asian problems.

Most likely negotiations about the pound, MLF and Malaysia all played a part in the British decision to pledge limited support for US policy on Vietnam.

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[117] Papers of William P. Bundy, Box 1, Chapter 19, p. 22A, LBJL

[118] Memo,Assistant Deputy Director (Intelligence) to McGeorge Bundy, 4 December 1964, "The British and Vietnam"

Certainly these issues, explicitly or implicity, were part of the context in which Wilson overcame his reservations about the wisdom of the US fight in South East Asia.

Assessment of the Wilson/Johnson Meeting

Johnson's interpretation of his first meeting with Wilson is indicative of the dominant position US leaders now felt in relation to the British. When a diplomatic correspondent asked the President how his meeting with Wilson had gone, he replied that handling Wilson was like approaching a girl the first time you date her, first you cuddle up a bit and then commence feeling around to test her response.[119] Clearly this was how Johnson approached Wilson on Vietnam. William Bundy states that as late as November 30 in a draft position paper he had suggested that the President not ask for any additional British contribution 'in view of the British role in Malaysia'. Bundy argued against such pressure 'when the 'confrontation' situation was at its height.' Nevertheless, as Bundy outlines 'in the final version of the Paper, the limitation was removed.'[120] While the Administration did not have realistic expectations of a British troop deployment in Vietnam, it would appear that Johnson himself could not resist the opportunity of making his English ally squirm a little.

William Bundy summed up the discussions on Vietnam as 'important initial explorations of what was to become a crucial subject' but 'generally speaking ... Wilson's reaction was one of support. There did not appear to be any significant

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119 Frank Cormier, *The Way He Was* (New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1977) p. 181

120 Papers of William P. Bundy, Box 1, Chapter 19, pp. 22/22A, LBJL

change in the British view of Asia, through the transition from Lord Home's to that of Wilson.'[121]

This first meeting between Wilson and Johnson was, according to Wilson's personal and political secretary, Marcia Williams, 'the most important and successful' of all the Prime Minister's visits. This assessment is undoubtedly correct. The trip established an apparently pleasant tone in the personal relationships and Wilson's success in persuading the Americans to reject MLF was the highpoint of Wilson's diplomatic efforts in Washington. Nevertheless, Wilson returned to London:

> a trifle disembodied. He had been at the receiving end of the onslaught of economic problems, and then had been to America engaged in even more intricate ones of defence. Now he had the problem which face all Prime Ministers, of readjusting to the home scene after an overseas trip, particularly after the exposure to the grand VIP treatment one receives on these occasions.[122]

Despite this period of readjustment Wilson managed to convey his positive feelings about his Washington visit to his colleagues and country. The day after he returned from Washington he reported back to the Cabinet. The meeting was recorded not only by the Cabinet Secretary but also by Richard Crossman, Minister for Housing. Essentially their notes convey the same detail but the Crossman diary is couched in less diplomatic language and reveals some interesting asides. According to Crossman, and not mentioned in Cabinet records, Wilson 'started by stating there were two conferences, one which took place and one which the British press

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121 Ibid

122 Ibid, p. 42

reported'. He denied press reports that 'a pistol had been put to his head on Vietnam'. Wilson himself felt that he had been in a stronger position, personally and politically, than was portrayed. Cabinet records note that the Prime Minister said his trip to Washington had been 'a successful visit, conducted in a very friendly and relaxed atmosphere. It established our main purpose of making clear our basic defence policy and preparing the ground for further, more detailed, discussions'. The Americans had emphasised the importance of Britain's world role and stressed their desire that this continue, particularly East of Suez. They did, however, appreciate 'the burden on our economy which this entailed'. According to Wilson's notes for the Cabinet, the British

> emphasised our determination to reduce defence expenditure and to get the economy going again. Very useful and understanding talk with L.B.J., Dillon and Martin - 'the talk which never happened' - about the pressure on sterling and our need for time to allow our long-term measures to take effect. They endorsed both what we had done and what we had decided not to do.[123]

In an unpublicised meeting to discuss the British economy, Wilson got the impression that Johnson was extremely understanding. According to Crossman's recollection of Wilson's Cabinet report, Johnson had 'virtually promised us all aid short of war'.[124] If the Crossman notes are the more accurate it suggests either Wilson's tendency for embellishment or Johnson's for hyperbole. Either way, it again illustrates problems in communication.

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123 North American Visit: Notes for Cabinet, PREM 13/104, PRO

124 Richard Crossman, *The Crossman Diaries: Selections from the Diaries of a Cabinet Minister 1964-70.* London: Mandarin, 1991, 11 December 1964, p. 53

On Vietnam, Crossman points out that Wilson was eager to point out that the final communiqué had emphasised continuing discussions at all levels. Wilson believed that this meant 'they want us with them ... They want our new constructive ideas after the epoch of sterility. We are now in a position to influence events more than ever before for the last ten years'.[125]

At the end of 1964 Anglo-American relations appeared to be sound, and Vietnam was not, as yet, a substantial issue between the two nations. Although unhappy with Wilson's refusal to provide troops for the Vietnam war, the Johnson administration was not surprised at this decision. Still, the Prime Minister's lack of real support on Vietnam would be used as a source of criticism in future discussions regarding support of the pound and the maintenance of Britain's military role East of Suez. At the same time, however, the US' growing desire for 'more flags' in Vietnam meant Wilson could use US hopes of a deeper British commitment, or at least continuing loyal diplomatic support, to good effect. The fact that Wilson was unable to deliver anything of substance on Vietnam and his own hope for a close relationship with the US, and Johnson in particular, may have meant that the Americans could reap dividends in other areas. In the foreign policy world of national interests, the Americans, and Johnson especially, were tempted to indulge in moral blackmail.

Wilson left Washington convinced that he had a growing personal relationship with LBJ and a sound basis for a stronger relationship with the United States.

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125 Ibid, p. 54

CHAPTER 3

JANUARY-APRIL 1965
WITH US, BUT WOBBLY ON NEGOTIATIONS ...[1]

In the early part of 1965 the Johnson administration began laying the foundations for a major commitment to the war in Vietnam. The President and his advisers - military and civilian – discussed at length the avenues available to them as the situation in South Vietnam became increasingly unstable. The options at this stage centred mainly on military action although negotiations had not been ruled out. In relation to its allies, America was keen to secure more solid support. Events in the United States meant that the British Government faced new demands from Washington at the same time as facing increasing domestic pressure to initiate peace talks in Indochina. Specifically, this led to calls for the renewal of the Geneva Conference. As the Wilson Government pursued this and other options, the United States became increasingly irritated at Britain's mounting interference on Vietnam without any significant military or material commitment to the conflict. Anglo-American relations therefore began to suffer as a result of tensions over the war. In particular, Britain was concerned about 'creeping escalation' and a lack of adequate consultation, while America questioned Britain's reliability as an ally. Problems in the personal relationship between the two leaders exacerbated the growing rift between their two countries on South East Asia. Consequently, by late March there was a serious need to find a practical, working solution to the difficulties Vietnam raised for the Anglo-American relationship.

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[1] Memorandum from William Bundy to President Johnson, 16 February 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume II, Vietnam, January-June 1965, p. 292.

Anglo-American Relations at the Beginning of 1965

At the end of 1964 Anglo-American relations appeared to be sound. In his Annual Review of the United States in 1964, Lord Harlech, British Ambassador to the United States, informed Foreign Secretary Patrick Gordon Walker that 'Anglo-American relations remained close and cordial'. However, he recognised that in the coming years the 'special relationship' would be tested by the force of 'realpolitik':

> we shall be increasingly treated on our merits and shall be regarded not so much for who we are as for how we perform. Above all our influence will depend upon our ability to solve our own economic problems and to bring an end to what seems to the Americans to be a position of chronic insolvency.

Although Harlech felt the UK still possessed 'a unique capability of influencing American policy' he warned 'this will be a wasting asset unless we handle our own affairs with considerable skill and attention to the correct priorities'.[2]

Due to his apparent success during his December visit to Washington Wilson believed he was the man for the job. He was convinced he had made a strong impact on Johnson, had demonstrated the Labour Government's loyalty and integrity as an ally, and had paved the way for yet closer relations between the United States and the United Kingdom.[3] To capitalise on this another trip to Washington was planned by the Prime Minister for early 1965.

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[2] United States: Annual Review of 1964, 4 January 1965, FO371/179557, PRO.

[3] Hubert Humphrey wrote to Wilson of the "splendid relationship between you and the President" and the "excellent" press coverage of the visit., 6 January 1965, PREM 13, 682, PRO

Lyndon Johnson also planned to visit Britain for the first time as President. This almost happened sooner than anticipated when Winston Churchill died on 24 January. The President, who greatly admired the war-time leader, very much wanted to attend the funeral but was unable to do so as he was recovering from a bad cold that had resulted in a three day stay in Bethesda Naval Hospital. To the British, this would have been a welcome chance to get to know the Texan better. Many in the Foreign Office and in British political circles knew very little about the President, and just as importantly, felt Johnson neither knew nor cared much about Britain. As it was, Johnson planned to send three official mourners in his place: Secretary of State, Dean Rusk; Chief Justice Earl Warren; and the American Ambassador to Great Britain, David Bruce. Unfortunately Rusk also pulled out of the funeral with flu, leaving, to British eyes, two virtual unknowns at the funeral of the first 'honorary American'. Although a bad cold was potentially serious in a man who had had a heart attack, Johnson could not openly acknowledge his condition and his decision not to go to Britain for Churchill's funeral was seen by many as his choice, rather than a medical necessity. Not surprisingly, LBJ received complaints from the public and the media on both sides of the Atlantic for not attending.[4] The President's inability to attend Churchill's funeral also meant that later in the year considerable effort would be put into attempting to secure a visit to Britain by both the President and Vice-President Humphrey because as Paul Gore-Booth, Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office admitted, 'it would be a good thing for the President to acquire some first-hand knowledge of Britain before his administration is much

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[4] John Ramsden, 'Churchill's Funeral and Anglo-American Relations', Paper given at the Summer Conference of the Institute of Contemporary British History, 'Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century', 8 July 1998

older'.[5] Clearly, however, this mishandling of the arrangements for Churchill's funeral had done short-term damage to Anglo-American relations and was not a good omen for Anglo-American relations in 1965.

Escalation Begins - The American Decision to Begin Air Strikes on North Vietnam

The new year brought growing problems for the US Government in relation to Vietnam. November and December of 1964 had seen Viet Cong attacks on US bases around Saigon resulting in the deaths of Americans and Vietnamese. Despite the Congressional authority of the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, the Johnson administration hesitated to bomb North Vietnam, largely because of the fear of reprisals from China and the Soviet Union. By January 1965 President Johnson was being advised by Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense and McGeorge Bundy that 'our current policy can lead only to disastrous defeat'.[6] This conclusion came as increased activity by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese helped produce an increasingly unstable political situation in the South, which saw a series of attempted military coups in which General Nguyen Khanh, head of the South Vietnamese government looked likely to be overthrown by either his own generals or by the Buddhists.[7] The US felt that selective air strikes on North Vietnam would produce positive political and psychological results: they would stiffen the morale of the South Vietnamese and

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[5] Paul Gore-Booth to Sir Patrick Dean, Foreign Office Minute, 'Possibility of a Visit to the UK by President Johnson and/or Vice-President Humphrey', 12 July 1965, FO371 179573, PRO. Sir Paul Gore-Booth took over from Sir Harold Caccia on 10 May 1965.

[6] Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), p. 38; Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-69* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 121

[7] Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, pp. 37-38

signal US determination to inflict heavy damage on North Vietnam. According to McGeorge Bundy, at this point all that was needed was 'the right provocation'.[8]

Thus Walt Rostow, a senior Department of State official, was sent to London in January to discuss the possibility of selective bombing of North Vietnam. While the Americans were not seeking advice as such, they clearly wanted to keep the British abreast of some of their thinking, to gauge the limits of the Labour government's support, and to assess possible international reaction such to the bombing. Apparently Wilson gave Rostow 'no encouragement' for such a move.[9]

When McGeorge Bundy announced he was going to visit Vietnam on 4-7 February, the Foreign Office commented that 'the moment of truth approaches'.[10] Wilson felt, and the Cabinet agreed on 28 January, that he should be in Washington at this crucial juncture, if only to ascertain whether the US saw any role for the Geneva Co-Chairs.[11] When the Prime Minister met with Dean Rusk at 10 Downing Street the following day he made it clear that although the UK would continue its support of American policy, he could not sanction US policy ahead of time.[12] Although this was, of course, a sensible approach for the leader of a sovereign nation to take, Wilson was also leaving himself room to manoeuvre.

The Foreign Office considered Britain's position more fully when Alexei Kosygin, the Chairman of Ministers of the USSR, visited North Vietnam at the beginning of February. The possibility existed that this visit might signal the beginning of a proposal from the Russians for a negotiated settlement in Vietnam.

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8 Telegram from Lord Harlech to Foreign Office, 1 January 1965, FO 371/175503/DV 103145/234B, PRO

9 Harold Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 79

10 Minute for P.M. Harold Wilson, 4 February 1965, PREM 13/692, PRO

11 Cabinet meeting, 28 January 1965, CAB 128/39, PRO

12 Bruce diaries, 29 January 1965

The time seemed ripe for Britain to 'offer her services'.[13] After further deliberation, the Foreign Office decided this would be a mistake as the United States had already invested 'too much effort, too many lives, too much money and, above all, too much prestige' in South Vietnam 'to welcome such cold detachment' from an outsider.

> We could do grave harm to Anglo-American relations by rushing in with unpalatable proposals. If failure comes in Vietnam, it is bound to cause profound dismay and recrimination in the United States. There will be a general search for someone to blame and British intervention at the present stage could all too easily make us the principal scapegoat.[14]

For the time being, therefore, the British Government decided to keep its opinions to itself, and the Prime Minister's plans for a visit to Washington were abandoned.

The Johnson administration's deliberations over air strikes ended on 6 February when an army advisers' barracks at Pleiku was attacked by the Viet Cong, leaving nine Americans dead and over a hundred injured. The National Security Council advised the President to retaliate immediately. Johnson duly authorised Operation Flaming Dart, tit-for-tat bombing raids on North Vietnam. The Americans attempted to give Wilson and Michael Stewart, the new British Foreign Secretary, advance notice of this action but could only reach the Permanent Under Secretary, Harold Caccia at the Foreign Office.[15] Regardless, the British Government rushed to approve US action and as *Tribune* noted: 'Significantly enough, these reprisals were supported at the United Nations by only two nations - Great Britain and Formosa.'[16]

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13 Briefing Paper: Prime Minister's Visit to Washington, 2 February 1965, FO371/180539/DV 103145/20, PRO

14 Ibid

15 Gordon Walker had lost his seat at Smethwick during the 1964 election and was replaced by Stewart in January of 1965. Stewart would be Foreign Secretary until August 1966.

16 *Tribune*, Vol. 29, No. 7, 12 February 1965, p. 8

The rapid escalation in US military involvement in Vietnam, and the accompanying increase in world tension, led to British Parliamentary unease. Stewart, in his first appearance at the Dispatch Box as Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, faced several questions on the issue. Stewart's appointment had proved pleasing to Washington as he was seen as a long-time loyal friend to the United States and his stout defence of US policy in Vietnam began during his first series of questions in the House. As *The Times* reported the next day:

> If diplomacy is the art of remaining firm while giving the least offence to all sides, then Michael Stewart, the new Foreign Secretary, made a most impressive debut in the House of Commons .... Dealing with the situation in Vietnam, he displayed a smooth blend of tact and authority ...[17]

The Foreign Secretary rejected calls for the reconvening of the Geneva Conference on the grounds that 'he doubted ... whether sufficient agreement existed to justify such a conference'.[18] This diplomacy endeared Stewart to the Americans but inflamed Labour's left-wing and resulted in them tabling a peace motion in the Commons the following day. Fifty Labour MPs signed the motion, putting pressure on the British Government to take an initiative to bring about a ceasefire and political settlement in Vietnam.

Given the Labour Government's small majority in the House, this largely left-wing pressure was not taken lightly by the Prime Minister, especially as he had also received private requests for 'British diplomacy' on the issue. An old colleague and Labour MP, David Ennals, had known Wilson for many years in his capacity as

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17 *The Times*, 9 February 1965

18 Hansard, Vol. 706, Col. 38

International Secretary of the Labour Party and used their personal friendship in order to try to influence the Prime Minister. He wrote to Wilson on 9 February arguing that 'our co-Chairmanship of the 1954 conference does give us an opportunity and a responsibility' to act. He also suggested that 'those forces in the USA who recognize ... that negotiation is necessary would welcome British assistance to get them off the peg'. Ennals therefore suggested that 'without delay Michael Stewart should fly to Washington and then, if possible, to Moscow ... It would dramatize our concerns, emphasize our sense of responsibility and would, I believe, be warmly welcomed throughout the country'.[19]

These public and private requests for British action go some way to explaining the most infamous exchange between Harold Wilson and Lyndon Johnson: the Prime Minister's late-night telephone call to the President. As the Foreign Office later put it, neither at home nor abroad could Wilson appear to be 'standing idly by while events moved dangerously in Vietnam.'[20] On the evening of 10 February Wilson received news of a Viet Cong attack on the US barracks at Qui Nhon in which 30 American servicemen lost their lives. He responded to this news with a proposal to fly to Washington to have a 'personal discussion' with Johnson on the dangers of over-reacting to the present crisis, particularly the risk of nuclear war.[21] The Prime Minister's vision of an informal 'closeness' with the President was about to be put to the test. Unfortunately as David Bruce put it, 'the President made short shrift of this project.'[22]

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[19] David Ennals to Harold Wilson, 9 February 1965, PREM 13/519, PRO

[20] "Vietnam", 11 February 1965, PREM 13/692, PRO

[21] Wilson, *The Labour Government 1964-1970*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971) p. 116

[22] Bruce Diaries, 11 February 1965

Harlech informed the Prime Minister that the White House 'was very strongly against a visit ... at this time' but suggested that Wilson first contact the President by telephone before making up his mind.[23] McGeorge Bundy tried to delay such a call, suggesting the Prime Minister should ring the following morning.[24] Wilson was not willing to take this advice, however, as he knew he would have to face the House of Commons later in the day and meet with his Cabinet at lunchtime on Thursday. The President agreed to receive the call which took place on an open line between 3.15 and 3.30 am British time (11 February) and between 10.15-10.30 pm Washington time (10 February).[25]

The British transcript of this telephone call, most of which is declassified, reveals how Wilson got the Johnson treatment. Johnson dominated the conversation and was easily able to put the Prime Minister on the defensive by letting 'fly in an outburst of Texan temper' as Wilson so aptly put it. [26] McGeorge Bundy made notes on the President's side of the conversation and his record does not contradict either the official British record or Wilson's own recollection of the conversation contained in his memoirs.[27] The President regularly cut Wilson off mid-sentence and had ready, forceful and often brusque replies to the Prime Minister's pleas and questions. Although Wilson often got close to offering advice, and even hinted at criticism, Johnson interrupted him before it could actually be delivered.

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[23] Ibid

[24] Memorandum of Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson, FRUS, 1964-68, Volume II, p. 229

[25] Record of a Telephone Conversation between the Prime Minister and President Johnson on 11 February 1965, PREM 13/692, PRO; Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 80

[26] Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 116

[27] Memorandum of Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume II, p. 229

Wilson began the conversation by outlining British concerns about a possible escalation in US action in Vietnam and repeated his proposal to fly to Washington to discuss matters further.

> Our problem is that every nation in the world is making a statement. India and France have taken the initiative. The U.S.S.R. were saying last week they would be accepting responsibility as Chairmen. It is very difficult here for us to be saying nothing at all except that whatever the U.S. decides to do we shall go along with of course. The feeling is that we tag along afterwards .... The feeling is that I should come over as quickly as possible.

Johnson thought such a visit would be 'a serious mistake', that Wilson should 'not get upset, keep a normal pulse' and in his position 'would wait until I was called upon to do something and consider it on the merits'. The language here is particularly telling; already Johnson was letting Wilson know his place. Johnson nevertheless reassured Wilson that US action would 'be very measured and very reasonable action.'

Clearly annoyed by Wilson's presumptuousness, the President reminded the Prime Minister that he wasn't constantly offering advice about Malaysia:

> a trip, Mr. Prime Minister, on this situation would be very misunderstood and I don't think any good would flow from it. If one of us jumps across the Atlantic every time there is a critical situation, next week I shall be flying over when Sukarno jumps on you and I will be giving you advice.

When Wilson countered 'We do not want to dash over. We just want to talk', Johnson replied 'We have got telephones!'

The President's suspicion that Wilson's proposal to fly over was part of the British Prime Minister's use of the 'special relationship' for domestic political purposes is also apparent.

> Johnson: Let me send you the exact situation as I view it on a classified cable. You could show this cable to your colleagues and then you could cable back to me with whatever suggestions you have.
>
> PM: I cannot show it to the House of Commons, that is my trouble.
>
> Johnson: You would not want to use me as an instrument to deal with the House of Commons.[28]

Eventually, the President's limited patience ran out. Wilson records in his memoirs that in relation to 'an earlier reference to Clem Attlee's visit to President Truman over the danger of Korean escalation in December 1950, he [Johnson] pointed out that we had troops in Korea, not in Vietnam'.[29] Although there is no specific mention of Korea in the transcript, Johnson evidently resented Wilson's interference, considering the lack of British troops in Vietnam. He pointed out that 'as far as my problem in Vietnam we have asked everyone to share it with us. They were willing to share advice but not responsibility'. He then delivered his most telling point:

> I won't tell you how to run Malaysia and you don't tell us how to run Vietnam .... If you want to help us some in Vietnam send us some men and send us some folks to deal with these guerillas. And announce to the press that you are going to help us. Now if you don't feel like doing that, go on with your Malaysian problem ...[30]

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[28] Record of a Telephone Conversation between the Prime Minister and President Johnson, PREM 13/692, PRO, p. 2

[29] Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 116

[30] Ibid

When, later in the conversation, Wilson made the mistake of saying the only thing he would be able to say to his critics at home was that there had been a call in the middle of the night, Bundy recorded that 'the President replied with some sharpness that it was the Prime Minister and not he who placed the call in the middle of the night. The President was just answering it'.[31]

Although this conversation consisted of more than a discussion of the situation in Vietnam, it is particularly noticeable that Malaysia was brought up in this context. The President clearly saw the US' limited involvement in Malaysia as parallel to Britain's limited involvement in Vietnam. As responsibility was not shared in these respects, advice should be sought and not forced on one another. Interestingly, LBJ also raised MLF during this argument, suggesting he had compromised on this issue and had taken a backseat role, something Wilson should do on Vietnam.

> I tried to be very co-operative on the MLF when you were here .... I tried to hold my real views until you had talked to the Germans. I had very strong views on that and I did not want to be domineering.[32]

By the end of the conversation Wilson had been exposed to many sides of Johnson's character. One minute ranting at the Prime Minister, the next minute expressing his understanding of Wilson's domestic difficulties, one minute playing the martyr or wounded soldier, the next bullying once more. Wilson was completely disarmed. Not only did he fail to get the President's approval to visit Washington, he also did not manage to put over any substantive points on Vietnam. Instead he was reduced

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[31] Memorandum of Telephone Conversation Between President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume II, p. 229

[32] Ibid, p. 2

to stressing British loyalty on Vietnam and promised that this would 'be the position tomorrow'.[33] Johnson expressed his appreciation.

This late-night conversation proved a turning point in the Wilson-Johnson relationship, and does seem to turn on their personal chemistries. The call demonstrates Johnson's impatience with Wilson, and there is little sign of intimacy between the two leaders. In the midst of a growing crisis in Vietnam, Johnson was extremely annoyed by Wilson's apparent impertinence in thinking he had the right to put his views across in person The call also provides another example of the darker side of Johnson's psyche. George Reedy, Johnson's Press Secretary throughout the 1950s and for much of the Presidency, speaks of LBJ's 'tendency to fly into rages for reasons totally inadequate to the degree of ferocity which he would display' and of his tendency to be a bully who 'would exercise merciless sarcasm on people who could not fight back but could only take it'.[34] Given Britain's reliance on US support of the pound, amongst other things, Wilson had little choice but to take it. Wilson did not yet fully understand Johnson's personality or comprehend the limits of his personal relationship with the President. The relationship between the two leaders was still in its infancy and at this stage the Prime Minister may have believed the glowing press and official reaction to his December visit to Washington, seriously overestimating his ability to influence the President. The phone call would not be forgotten by the President. When rumours about the poor state of the relationship between Wilson and Johnson surfaced the next month, including the suggestion that the Prime Minister wasn't welcome in Washington, McGeorge told the President that 'none of it takes account of the very great damage which Wilson did to himself by

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33 Ibid, p. 5

34 George Reedy, *Lyndon Johnson: A Memoir* (New York: Andrews and McMeel, Inc., 1982), p. x and p. 56

his outrageous phone call to you'.[35] Although Wilson and Johnson would continue to exchange views, it was mainly by cable and letter, and very infrequently by telephone. Johnson, a President who favoured telephone communication, did not want to talk to Wilson unless it was absolutely necessary.

At the end of their conversation Johnson had agreed to send Wilson a cable outlining the situation in Vietnam and current US plans. He would also brief Bruce, then in Washington, who would bring a personal message from the President to Wilson on his return to London. Within hours the cable was duly sent, via McGeorge Bundy, and included advance notice of US plans to bomb an army barracks in North Vietnam. Wilson's call may have precipitated this advance warning; it certainly explains the timing of it. In the cable the President reminded the British Prime Minister how privileged and classified their communication was. He also repeated the request that in future Wilson's suggestions should come via cable or telephone. The message was clear: the Prime Minister should stay at home.[36]

Wilson put the best possible gloss on this exchange when he informed the Cabinet the next day that he had been 'in personal touch' with the President and 'had reaffirmed that we were ready, in our capacity as co-Chairman of the 1954 Geneva Conference on Vietnam, to put our good offices at the disposal of the parties.' It was also noted tactfully that 'the situation had not yet developed to the point at which the United States Government might wish to avail themselves of this offer.'[37]

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35 Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, 22 March 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume II, p. 468

36 Telegram from McGeorge Bundy to Oliver Wright for the Prime Minister, 11 February 1965, PREM 13/692, PRO

37 Cabinet Minutes, 11 February 1965, CAB 128/39, PRO

News of the late night telephone call appeared in the Press on 13 February. *The Guardian's* Richard Scott reported that 'Mr Harold Wilson was contemplating flying to Washington at the beginning of this week to talk to President Johnson about the Vietnamese crisis.'[38] The White House was furious at the apparent leak. George Reedy then confirmed in a press briefing that 'there was a direct communication' between the Prime Minister and the President but did so only because there had been a leak in London. Given the President's request for secrecy surrounding their recent communications, the Foreign Office at Wilson's request cabled Washington urgently to deny any involvement in the leak of specific details of the conversation:

> The Prime Minister wishes the President to know that at this end we have kept strictly to the terms of the last sentence of your teleporter message to me of Wednesday 10 February: the rest is intelligent speculation.[39]

Nonetheless, the leak - the first of many - added to the President's lingering doubts about Wilson's loyalty, and the personal relationship between the two was further soured.

On his return to London, Ambassador Bruce was put in an awkward position.[40] On 16 February he received a telegram from Washington annulling his previous instruction to brief Wilson, instead the Ambassador was advised to 'avoid seeing the Prime Minister, if this were possible, but if not, to confine' the conversation to 'generalities'.[41] This evasive action was due to the fact that

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38 *The Guardian*, 13 February 1965 in Telegram from Murray, Foreign Office to Patrick Dean, Washington, No. 1119, 13 February, 1965, PREM 13/692, PRO

39 Telegram from Foreign Office to British Embasy, Washington, 13 February 1965, PREM 13/692, PRO

40 The Ambassador lamented in his diaries later that week that "each night of this week after midnight I have been called on the telephone about Vietnam."

41 Bruce Diaries, 16 February 1965

Washington was still carefully considering its options and had not finalised a timetable of action in Vietnam. Bruce met with Wilson and Stewart and informed them that he had been told to keep the P.M. 'closely informed' on US plans in Vietnam but that these plans were not formed.[42] The British were particularly anxious to know how the Americans saw the issue of the timing of a conference on Vietnam and on a possible cease-fire. Bruce could only reply that 'the United States Government wanted a conference as soon as possible' but would have to continue its 'program of retaliatory strikes' until a cease-fire had been agreed to.[43]

The next day, having received further instructions from the State Department, Bruce saw Wilson again. Unlike the previous day, there was no talk of negotiations. Instead, Bruce reported that the US would be continuing air and naval action against North Vietnam. Wilson commented that the 'plan now appeared to be to step up military action without making proposals for a political solution' and 'this was the pill without the jam'.[44] Furthermore, he believed 'this would make it very difficult for the outside world and in particular for the UK who would, of course, have to support the US without seeing a light at the end of the tunnel.' He would personally 'be in for a very rough reception' and there would be increased domestic pressure on him to act as a mediator. He also reminded Bruce of Johnson's earlier cable message saying he would get a 'complete summary of proposed US action'. He asked Bruce to report back to Washington that in his view 'the question of entering into negotiations was a cardinal point of the package' and 'without such negotiations' the United Kingdom would be put in a very difficult position as Co-Chairman,

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[42] Record of Conversation between the Prime Minister and the US Ambassador, David Bruce, 16 February 1965, PREM 13/692, PRO

[43] Ibid

[44] Ibid

particularly in view of renewed Soviet interest in that position.[45] Nevertheless, Wilson indicated that he 'would solidly support' American action.[46] Surprisingly, the Prime Minister also asked the Ambassador if he should try to contact Johnson directly over his concerns. Bruce remembers that he 'tried as tactfully as I could to advise him he not do so at the present time, but use as a channel his Embassy in Washington'.[47] Obviously the President had communicated his annoyance at Wilson's late night call to Bruce and his unwillingness to speak with Wilson at the present time. Either the Prime Minister did not recognise the extent of the breach in his relationship with the President, or he felt strongly enough on this issue that he felt it was worth pushing the President on it. Bruce, who had already earned the trust and respect of the President, would be increasingly relied on by the President to deal with the Prime Minister's regular questions.

Wilson was right to be concerned about the lack of talk of negotiations; the US government simply was not interested in discussions at this stage. McGeorge Bundy reflected the opinion of many of the President's advisers when he informed him in February of 1965 that:

> there is no way of negotiating ourselves out of Vietnam which offers any serious promise at present. It is possible that at some future time a neutral non-Communist force may emerge, perhaps under Buddhist leadership, but no such force currently exists, and any negotiated US withdrawal today would mean surrender on the instalment plan.[48]

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45 Ibid

46 Memo for the President from McGeorge Bundy, "Wilson's Talk with Bruce Today", 17 February 1965, NSF, Memos to President, Vol. 8, 1/1/65-2/28/65, LBJL

47 Bruce diaries, 17 February 1965

48 Memo, McGeorge Bundy to the President, "The Situation in Vietnam", Top Secret, NSC History - Troop Deployment in Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, p. 44

Indeed, there were only two dissenting voices that questioned the efficacy of bombing raids - George Ball, Under Secretary of State and James Thomson. Vice-President Hubert Humphrey later joined them. Thomson recalls that at this stage in the war the decision-makers spent more time selecting bombing targets than on assessing possible areas for negotiations.[49]

On 17 February the President met with former President Eisenhower, Secretary McNamara, General Wheeler, McGeorge Bundy and General Goodpaster to listen to Eisenhower's thinking on the situation in South Vietnam. Johnson asked Eisenhower to comment on the message being sent to David Bruce as a basis for his discussions with Wilson in which a major point was 'we do not repeat not expect to touch upon readiness for talks or negotiations at this time'. Eisenhower argued that the US would be best to negotiate from strength rather than from weakness:

> negotiation from weakness is likely to lead only into deceit and vulnerability, which could be disastrous to us. On the other hand, if we can show a fine record of successes, or real and dramatic accomplishment, we would be in a good position to negotiate. [50]

Eisenhower commented that Wilson 'had not had experience with this kind of problem. We, however, have learned that Munichs win nothing, therefore, his answer to the British would be 'Not now boys.'[51] This was, in effect, what Johnson had instructed Bruce to say.

As well as forcing a parliamentary reaction, the US air strike on North Vietnam also prompted the Foreign Office into a flurry of debate and, as in the past,

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49 Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, p. 44

50 Memo of Meeting with President Johnson, General Eisenhower, Secretary McNamara, General Wheeler, McGeorge Bundy, General Goodpaster), 17 February 1965, FRUS 1964-68 Vol. II, p. 298

51 Ibid

American and British diplomats differed over their approach to the problem of Vietnam. The Head of the South East Asia Department, J.E. Cable, assessed the problem of 'Seeking a Solution in Vietnam' in an internal minute. Summarising the American choice as being either 'decision or drift', Cable felt that the British should

> favour a deliberate American policy of cutting their losses in Viet-Nam, because this offers the best chance of avoiding the dangers of escalation while mitigating the adverse repercussions on Western influence and prestige. The question then arises whether we can afford to let the U.S. Government reach this conclusion themselves or whether we ought to or can attempt to influence their choice.

He concluded that 'it is probably premature to attempt to answer this question now. We know that the US Government are acutely sensitive on this subject and that advice from us would be resented.[52]

Cable's paper then progressed through the hierarchy of the Foreign Office, starting with E.H. Peck, Head of the Far Eastern Department. Peck felt Britain had

> no option but to hear U.S. views in the hope they give us an opening to discuss, without rancour, an ultimate solution. Meanwhile we must support them in public, while getting down to a discussion of realities in private.

The Permanent-Under-Secretary, Sir Harold Caccia, agreed with this summation.[53]

Lord Walston, Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, felt Cable set 'out admirably the unattractive choices facing the Americans' and added that he also agreed that despite the Americans' sensitivity on this subject: 'they should be pressed, with the utmost tact, to face the realities of the situation, to make up their

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52 15 February 1965, FO371/180580, PRO

53 E.H. Peck, 'Vietnam', 15 February 1965, FO371/180580, PRO

minds, and to tell us what their choice is. The longer the choice is delayed, the harder it will be to make it objectively'.[54]

Michael Stewart toyed with the idea of sending Cable's thoughts to the Americans, via the British Ambassador.

> Apart from the intrinsic importance of coming to a speedy decision on this matter, our continued apparent inactivity is giving the Russians and Chinese the opportunity of spreading it about that H.M.G. is no more than a lackey of U.S. Government policy and can take no stand on its own without the approval of its dollar masters.[55]

In the event, Stewart asked Harlech to express his disappointment at American intentions in Vietnam to Rusk, stating 'our aim is not to make any unnecessary difficulties for the U.S. Government. But the point has come where they really must try to enable their friends to continue to back them wholeheartedly in public'.

Britain required

> some indication of American readiness to do something other than responsive military action. In brief, what were the circumstances in which they would be ready to talk. This need not at this stage commit them to any particular forum.[56]

Bruce, apparently sympathetic to British arguments, said he would also do what he could to see that due weight was given to them in Washington.[57] Wilson asked Bruce to let the Johnson administration know that he hoped 'the British would be

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[54] Lord Walston to Stewart, 17 February 1965, FO371/180580, PRO

[55] Ibid

[56] Telegram from Michael Stewart to Harlech, 18 February 1965, FO371/180589, PRO

[57] Note by J.M. Henderson to W.J. Adams, 18 February 1965, FO371/180580; Telegram from Stewart to Rusk, 18 February 1965, 'Vietnam', FO371/180580, PRO

kept in a position to reply to critics that it had been fully informed in advance—he would prefer to say consulted—on proposed American tactics'.[58]

By the end of the week that started with the US air strikes on North Vietnam, Wilson, the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office had all arrived at the same conclusion: the best way forward for the British was to bide their time in the hope that an opportunity would arise when they would either be invited to give their advice, or could give it at a time when the Americans would be more open to it. The lesson to be drawn from Wilson's offer to fly to Washington was that LBJ could not be lobbied at times of crisis, particularly if the Prime Minister's motives were too political in nature. Johnson had received Wilson's approach as personal criticism, and the President had instantly gone on the defensive. Moreover, the lack of direct British involvement in Vietnam severely limited London's ability to contribute to the debate taking place in Washington over tactics.

As well as deciding to play a waiting game with the Americans - hoping to find a way of quietly and gently persuading the Americans of the error of their ways in Vietnam - the Wilson government had decided to try to maintain some independence, and give the impression of activity, via a series of peace initiatives. Co-opting the Russians into action would be a good start.

The Russians and the Geneva Conference

While Washington deliberated over its reactions to the Pleiku and Qui Nhon attacks, the British began to pursue, more seriously, the possibility of revitalizing the

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58 Ibid

Co-Chairmanship of the Geneva Conference. George Thomson, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, flew to Moscow on 12 February ostensibly to sign a new Anglo-Soviet cultural agreement. However, the British press rightly surmised that the Thomson visit would foster diplomatic exchanges over Vietnam, especially if negotiations were to develop.[59] Up to this point the Soviets had been cool towards the prospect of using the Geneva conference to gain peace in Vietnam. However, by the time of Thomson's visit their attitude had changed. Sir Humphrey Trevelyan, the British Ambassador in Moscow, felt that this was 'the result of pressure on Mr. Kosygin from the North Viet Nam Government' and was probably as a result of the deteriorating situation in Vietnam.[60] The Soviets were certainly alarmed by the American bombing of North Vietnam and verbally condemned it, not least because Premier Kosygin had been in the country at the time.

After tentatively courting the Soviets on the Geneva Conference through Thomson's visit, the British kept up the pressure through diplomatic exchanges at Embassy level. Lord Harlech was engaged in close consultation with Dean Rusk on this matter and reported back to the Foreign Office that although the Americans 'were convinced that the time was not right for the US to take an initiative pointing in the direction of negotiation,' there would be an advantage in getting the Russians to take some responsibility as Geneva Co-Chairs because 'if they were prepared to play this role they would be acting more as mediators than advocates for one side in the quarrel'.[61]

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59 *The Times*, 13 February 1965

60 Cable from H. Treveleyan, Moscow to Foreign Office, No. 326, 16 February 1965, PREM 13/692, PRO

61 Cable from Harlech, Washington to Foreign Office, No. 401, 18 February 1965, PREM 13/692, PRO

With domestic demands on the British to act on Vietnam, Harlech conveyed his wish that the activities of the Co-Chairmen be made public. Implicitly acknowledging Wilson's political difficulties, the Americans agreed to this request.[62]

Trevelyan met with Sergei G. Lapin, the Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister on 20 February, and proposed that, as Geneva Co-Chairs, the United Kingdom and Soviet Union approach all members of the 1954 Geneva Conference and the Governments represented on the International Control Commission, requesting 'a statement on their views of the situation on Vietnam, in particular, on the circumstances in which they consider that a peaceful conclusion could be reached'.[63]

There were problems with this peace gambit from the start. The Russians would have liked a stronger proposal - a conference - rather than the British proposal for consultation with other countries. They were also unimpressed by British requests that a public statement be issued announcing their approach to the Soviets.

Lapin felt:

> We should discuss this question without publicity ... if you were to announce your initiative, even without revealing its precise nature, it would make the Soviet Government look passive, the Soviet Government would consequently be obliged to make an immediate public statement of its position.[64]

> Another major obstacle in the way of progress with the Soviets was the possibility of further air strikes on North Vietnam, which would, according to the

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62 The British were told they could tell the Russians 'we are confident that the US would respond to a request for their views'. Cable from Lord Harlech to the Foreign Office, No. 401, 18 February 1965, "South Vietnam", PREM 13, 692, PRO

63 Cable to Bangkok re. "Proposed Initiative by Co-Chairman on Vietnam", 20 February 1965, PREM 13/692. This proposal to the Russians was considered the first serious, international initiative for peace. "Negotiation Attempts on Vietnam," NSF, Country File, Vietnam, Vietnam 6C, 1961-68, Peace Initiatives: General International Initiatives (Retrospective Accounts), LBJL

64 Sir H. Trevelyan, Moscow to Foreign Office, 20 February 1965, PREM 13/692, PRO

British Ambassador in Moscow, 'doom the British initiative with the Soviets'.[65] The British urged Washington to 'hold off' bombing until the Soviet Union had replied to the proposal.[66]

British initiatives were also hampered by the fact that they were still in the dark about American plans in South East Asia. As happened many times during the 1950s and early 1960s, extreme concern was being expressed in London about the lack of clarity on the part of the American Government. It was noted at a meeting of the British cabinet on 18 February that

> before there could be any question of our trying to turn this development to our advantage in relation to a negotiated settlement of the dispute, the United States Government would have to indicate the type of negotiation which they would be prepared to undertake and the prior conditions which they might seek to impose before embarking upon it.[67]

The Administration was indeed 'completely silent … both publicly and privately.'[68] This was, as we now know, mainly because the Americans themselves had not yet developed their thoughts on negotiations.

When Rusk argued that the Soviets might make the ending of US air strikes a precondition to playing a role as Co-Chairman, parallels were again drawn with the British position in Malaysia. In a now familiar refrain Rusk 'assumed that the British would make sure that into the ensuing consideration there would also be the demand for North Vietnam to put an end to infiltration' just as the British in Malaysia 'would

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65 Memo of Conversation, "Discussion with British Ambassador on Viet Nam" between Lord Harlech, Michael Stewart, Secretary Rusk, 21 February 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, LBJL

66 Washington to Foreign Office, 26 February 1965, PREM 13/692, PRO

67 18 February 1965. CAB 128/39, Pt. 1, PRO

68 Telegram from Harlech to Foreign Office, 24 February 1965, FO371/180581, PRO

envisage reaction against Indonesia in response to rather less provocation'.[69] The US did however temporarily postpone its retaliatory air strikes, during which time Stewart and Trevelyan pressed the Soviets for an answer to their proposal.

Just three days later on 24 February the US informed London of its plan to restart air strikes (in response to the capture of a North Vietnamese freighter carrying arms and ammunition intended for the Vietcong) from 26 February. Harlech repeated to Ball, British 'anxiety' that such action might 'jeopardize the chances of a favourable response from the Russians' and emphasized that the British 'had hoped that action could be held up at least until we had seen the Russian reply'.[70] David Bruce summarised the US attitude on the matter: 'While we recognise their concern, and the possibility of some Soviet reaction, we cannot ever by implication get into a position of withholding a continuation of our air program.'[71]

It was clear to Harlech that the Americans would not accept a unilateral cease-fire and that at this stage the image of US military strength was more important than peace talks.[72] Partly because of adverse weather conditions and because South Vietnam was in the process of establishing a new Government under the leadership of General Quat, the US did not restart air strikes on North Vietnam until 2 March. British protests were, however, certainly part of the explanation for the delay in bombing as the US pondered the implications of increasing their military efforts despite calls for more negotiations.

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69 Memo of Conversation, "Discussion with British Ambassador on Viet Nam" between Lord Harlech, Michael Stewart, Secretary Rusk, 21 February 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Vol. 3, Box 207, LBJL

70 Telegram from Harlech to Foreign Office, 24 February 1965, FO371/180581, PRO

71 Bruce diaries, 25 February 1965

72 Telegram from Harlech to Foreign Office, 24 February 1965, FO371/180581, PRO

Benjamin Read, Special Assistant to the Secretary of State, later described attempts to reactivate the role of the Co-Chairmen as 'more form and less hope ... it was something you went through periodically just because if you succeeded you'd be better off. But you put very little hope into the process'.[73] The US on this occasion did little to help the process along.

Increasing Public Pressure on Wilson to Take Positive Action

One of the factors fuelling the intense behind-the-scenes diplomacy with the Soviets and the Americans was the growing debate within the Labour Party, and the wider Labour movement, on Vietnam. The first half of 1965 saw backbench pressure become increasingly vocal and active in condemnation of the Government. Wilson had said at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton on December 12, 1964, 'we now have a Government ready and able to take initiatives for peace'.[74] Consequently, expectations had been raised that the Labour Government would intervene in Vietnam. Very quickly the left-wing of the Labour Party was criticising the Wilson Government for its apparent inactivity in this area. Labour's 'independent' weekly newspaper, *Tribune* questioned the Prime Minister's emphasis on 'strengthening the alliance' with America, saying 'whatever that policy may involve, it surely does not imply the complete and abject sacrifice of our right to independent action and opinion.'[75]

Centrists within the Parliamentary Labour Party were also beginning to stir and, given the Government's small working majority in the House, Wilson had to

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73 Transcript, Benjamin Read Oral History Interview, Tape 2, p. 16, LBJL

74 *Tribune*, Vol. 29, No. 8, 19 February 1965, p. 1

75 Ibid, p. 1

take the threat of a backbench revolt ever more seriously. On 17 February, a group of Labour MPs who had sent a letter to *The Times* calling for an 'immediate British initiative to achieve a cease-fire and the reconvening of the Geneva Conference', met in private with American Embassy officials to discuss the situation in Vietnam. Amongst these were two senior members of the Labour Party, Philip Noel-Baker and John Hynd and a number of relatively new MPs, namely Dick Taverne, Shirley Williams, Bernard Floud, Colin Jackson, Peter Shore and David Ennals. This was by no means a left-wing group of MPs; indeed, the group made it clear that it did not wish to cause embarrassment to its own or to the American government 'by associating themselves with the extreme anti-American and pro-DRV view of [the] Warbey faction in [the] Labor Party'. Nevertheless Embassy officials failed to convince it of the feasibility of American policy in Vietnam. The group remained sceptical over the prospect of a military solution in Vietnam and stressed the dangers of escalation. For the time being, however, it was willing to voice its objections to American and British policy without joining forces with the Labout Party's left-wing.[76]

One of these MPs, David Ennals, approached the Prime Minister for a second time, informally, via a personal letter. In the letter Ennals requested a meeting to discuss Vietnam because 'unless something can be said to the contrary - publicly or privately - there will be trouble for the party.' Ennals indicated that he was representing backbenchers who did not want 'another left-wing initiative.'[77]

In an attempt to appease these moderate MPs - and indeed the bulk of Labour Party - Wilson issued the following statement to the House on 23 February.

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[76] Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 17 February 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 203, LBJL

[77] David Ennals to Harold Wilson, 3 March, 1965, PREM 13, 519, PRO

> It is our hope that Her Majesty's Government can play an effective part in helping to resolve the present problems and to arrive at a basis for a peaceful settlement. To this end, we have been actively engaged in diplomatic consultations of a confidential nature. These consultations are still going on, and I hope the House will understand that it would be unwise to prejudice the results of much patient and discreet diplomacy by any premature public announcement. As soon as it is possible to do so, I will inform the House of the progress we have made and of the further action which we consider could most fruitfully lead to an end of the fighting and an eventual settlement.[78]

This sort of announcement hinting at secret, behind-the-scenes diplomacy, was to be one of the key tactics used by the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary in dispelling the notion of Government inactivity on Vietnam. It also implied a degree of intimacy with the Americans, which helped justify their public show of support for US policy in Vietnam. It was clear, however, that the Wilson Government would soon have to provide Parliament with more details of their 'consultations'.

At this stage, before the resumption of air strikes, hope remained that the Russians would give a positive reply to the British proposal. The British explained to the Americans that they were under increasing pressure to report their efforts to help in Vietnam 'both vis-a-vis British public, Parliament and also with friendly countries and public figures who either have direct interests in [the] matter or have raised Viet Nam question with [the] British'. They therefore wanted to inform several other countries (India, Laos, Thailand and France) as well as the United Nations Secretary General and His Holiness the Pope about their approach to the Soviets and to make a further statement to the House on the same lines.

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78 Hansard, Vol. 707 (Feb. 22- March 5), Written Answer, 23 February 1957, p. 69

Rusk had no 'serious problem' with the British informing the other countries as long as they were 'carried out on [a] strictly confidential basis' but given Russian sensitivities, Rusk felt a public announcement, such as a statement to the House of Commons 'would seem … almost sure to kill any chances of Russians agreeing to proceed.' It was hoped the British would therefore refrain from such action until all hopes of an affirmative reply from the Russians had gone.[79] Consequently, Harlech reported that the official reaction from Rusk and Ball was that the British

> approach to the Russians had been an extremely useful initiative which might eventually open up a way to a satisfactory solution of the Viet Nam problem. They would be very reluctant to see us give up the effort now and felt very strongly that the Russians should be given time to respond.[80]

As the British felt they must give a further statement in the House, but hoped to avoid damaging the chances of a positive reply, they asked the Americans to 'review' the Prime Minister's draft statement.

Before the Labour leadership and the Americans had time to formulate their plans on a statement, there was another leak. News of the Co-Chairmen's initiative was noted in an Associated Press report from London on 23 February. Dean Rusk was 'naturally concerned' at the leak, especially as the press report contained a direct quotation from Mr. Lapin's recent discussion with Mr. Trevelyan in Moscow. He was worried that this publicity might lead to an adverse response from the Soviets. The British again denied that the leak had taken place in London and tried to reassure the Secretary of State that the quotation from Lapin had come before Russian

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79 Department of State, Rusk to William Bundy, Telegram, 5 March, 1965, Declassified Document, Library of Congress

80 Harlech, Washington to Foreign Office, Telegram No. 537, 6 March 1965, FO371/180582/DV1075/56(B), PRO

requests for secrecy and therefore should not affect the Russian response.[81] Rusk was nevertheless worried that Wilson's acknowledgement to the House that 'we have been actively engaged in diplomatic consultations of a confidential nature' would be taken as confirmation of the soundings being taken by the Co-Chairmen.[82] Wilson pointed out that his written reply to a Parliamentary Question carefully avoided naming any specific Government.[83]

It is unlikely that the Labour Government's denial of responsibility for the leak did anything to comfort President Johnson, who was increasingly obsessed with secrecy and loyalty issues. He was particularly concerned that speculation about peace talks, especially ones that may well not amount to anything concrete, would raise public hopes. And, when the rumours on the peace front came to nothing, the Americans would be blamed. Or, even more worrying, Washington might be trapped into unreasonable terms by third parties misrepresenting US views. The revelation of the Co-Chair initiative therefore added to difficulties in the Anglo-American relationship. In public, the US tried to play down the talk of negotiations, especially after U Thant, Secretary-General of the UN, intimated at a press conference that the US was keeping the truth about potential peace talks secret. George Reedy denied that Johnson had any proposals before him.[84] This reaction confirmed opinion in the British government and the press that the US was annoyed by talk of peace moves. David Bruce admitted that although 'public opinion in Great Britain is overwhelmingly in favour of negotiations, through reconvening the 1954 Geneva

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81 Cable from Lord Harlech to the Foreign Office, 23 February 1965, "Vietnam", PREM 13, 692; Cable from Foreign Office to Washington, 24 February 196, p. 13, PREM 13, 692, PRO

82 Cable from Lord Harlech to the Foreign Office, 23 February 1965, PREM 13, 692, PRO

83 Cable from the Foreign Office to Washington, Tel. No. 1452, 24 February 1965, PREM 13, 692, PRO

84 *The Times*, 25 February 1965, p. 10

Conference, or otherwise. That does not suit our book, but the President is under great pressure at home to state US policy; it will only be credible abroad when presented by him'.[85]

Once the story was out, the British Government saw no need to deny its basic validity. On 1 March 1965, Michael Stewart added to the Prime Minister's statement of 23 February, and to press speculation, when he announced to the House that:

> as part of our confidential diplomatic discussions, we have been in touch with the Soviet Government. I am awaiting their comments on certain views which our Ambassador in Moscow communicated to them on 20th February. I would not want to prejudice the prospects by going into detail about these conversations.[86]

The following day saw the beginning of Operation Rolling Thunder - the sustained bombing of North Vietnam. It came as no surprise to the British, or the Americans, when the Russians finally came back on 18 March with a negative reply to the British suggestion that the Co-Chairs invite opinion from interested parties.

Strains in the Personal Relationship

Not surprisingly, given the clear evidence of transatlantic diplomatic activity, the press began to speculate on the relationship between Britain and America, and especially between President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson over Vietnam. *The Times'* American editor, Louis Heren argued in an article on 25 February that the Johnson administration was 'in no mood to listen' to anyone on the issue of Vietnam, not even old allies like Britain:

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85 Bruce diaries, 28 February 1965

86 Hansard, Vol. 707, Written Answer, 1 March 1965, Col. 166/167

> The consequences are not only exasperated comments on the efforts of friendly governments to find a basis for negotiation but the virtual severance of relations with those countries as far as the crisis is concerned. President Johnson has never favoured personal exchanges with ambassadors, but recently the most distinguished have come away empty-handed from the State Department. Special relations are of little account; the exclusion is complete, and the British Embassy is not much better placed than the Burundi Embassy ... in spite of the general irritation here there are no objections to Britain consulting in Moscow as long as American intentions are not misunderstood. The lack of communication here, however, does not make this easy.[87]

Heren was right to point out that the 'special relationship' did not necessary mean a preferential relationship. The Americans had long since stopped treating Britain to any special favours on South East Asia. In that sense, demands by Wilson's critics for stronger British action on Vietnam, failed to take account of the realities of Anglo-American relations in Asia. Wilson, representing the British, did not have, and could not have, as strong a profile in the White House or influence on the President as some thought. Indeed, many have questioned the extent to which anyone not directly involved in the conflict could have influenced the President on Vietnam .

By the beginning of March stories of a rift between Lyndon Johnson and Harold Wilson were rife. Bruce cabled Washington explaining that there had been a 'build up, on what appears to be a narrow base of fact, a public appearance of friction between the President and the PM over Viet-Nam'. *The Guardian* noted 'signs of exasperation' in Washington against 'being pushed too far and too fast by her friends' towards peace.[88] Explanations of Johnson's annoyance with Wilson's

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87 *The Times*, 25 February 1965, p. 10

88 *The Guardian*, 26 February 1965 in Bruce to Secretary of State, 2 March 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File, UK, Vol. III, Cables, 2/65-4/65, LBJL

peace moves varied. Godfrey Hodgson in the *Observer* felt that the President did 'not take seriously Mr. Wilson's claim that he is engaged in "diplomatic consultations of a confidential nature" with the Russians to get negotiations going'.[89] On 24 February the *Telegraph*'s lead editorial argued that Wilson's 'secret feelers towards negotiations have brought him only a snub from Washington'. Nevertheless the paper also noted that reports that 'President Johnson had expressed through a spokesman his annoyance over Mr. Wilson's posing as "honest broker" in the Viet Nam situation have caused surprise in Whitehall.'[90]

When Patrick Gordon Walker, former Foreign Secretary, visited the United States in early March and met with Dean Rusk he informed the Secretary of State that the British were alarmed by 'stories in Washington that the President was upset by HMG's attempts to get some kind of talks going on South Vietnam' and did not believe the British government had done anything 'without close and continuous contact with them'. Rusk, although apparently out of town at the time of the stories, assured Gordon Walker that such reports 'had not been officially inspired' and that 'Washington was in no way disturbed by our action'.[91] Despite this private reassurance, in order to preserve the image of a strong and united Anglo-American relationship, it was felt necessary for a State Department official to issue a denial of the stories of a rift.[92]

Despite Rusk's comforting words, there *was* discontent in the White House concerning the British. As indicated, Washington did not particularly welcome the

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89 *Observer*, 2 March 1965 in Bruce to Secretary of State, 2 March 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File, UK, Vol. III, Cables, 2/65-4/65, LBJL

90 *The Telegraph*, 24 February 1965 in Ibid

91 Patrick Gordon-Walker Diary, 6 March 1965, Churchill College Archives

92 Bruce diaries, 12 March 1965

Co-Chair initiative, although once it was under way, took it seriously. Moreover, Johnson was becoming even more concerned that he was being used by the British Prime Minister for domestic purposes, particularly after the previous month's late night call from Wilson. The President obviously preferred not to see the Prime Minister, if at all possible. By the end of February, Jack Valenti, LBJ's close aide at the White House, informed him that, 'Dean Rusk says there is no escape from seeing Prime Minister Wilson when he is here in April.'[93]

Another sign of Johnson's growing exasperation with the British was the 'mix up' over the announcement of Wilson's next visit to Washington (scheduled for 14-15 April) which was eventually made in Washington on 9 March.[94] Johnson prevaricated over the date of the visit as he was reluctant to meet the Prime Minister so soon lest it be perceived as an indicator that something was happening on the negotiation front. Wilson later commented to Bruce on the delay in announcing his visit:

> Surely, if the President wished ... the visit to be dissociated in the public mind from any discussions of the Viet Nam situation then the earlier the announcement was made the better. If the Prime Minister wished to mediate over Viet Nam he would not say that he was coming to do so in six weeks' time. The arguing about the announcement could have made both countries look very stupid ...[95]

Of course, the President's reluctance to set a date may also have been due to his growing disdain for Wilson's meddling on the peace front. It appears this either did not occur to Wilson or at least he did want to discuss this possibility with the

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93 Valenti to Johnson, 26 February 1965, GEN CO, Box 76, Folder - CO305 UK. 1/1/65-7/1/65, LBJL

94 Record of Conversation between Prime Minister and US Ambassador, Mr. D. Bruce at 12.15 pm at 10 Downing Street, 12 March 1965, PREM 13/693, PRO

95 Ibid

American Ambassador. The Press, however, were quick to pick up on this latest incident. On 13 March the *Daily Mail* said that Johnson was:

> far from enthusiastic when he was first approached about a meeting with Mr. Harold Wilson .... He even suggested that he might delegate Secretary of State Mr Dean Rusk to confer with the PM. However, he has now accepted that such a move would constitute an inconceivable snub and the White House has announced that the President would be "very happy" to see Mr. Wilson.... Mr Johnson's initial frigid reaction was not so much directed against Mr. Wilson personally. It reflected his general reluctance to get involved in top level diplomatic negotiations in the midst of the Vietnam crisis. Above all he does not want to give the communists the impression that he is under pressure from America's allies to enter into negotiations.[96]

Clearly there was some unwillingness on Johnson's part to waste time dealing with the British. Michael Stewart was due to visit Washington towards the end of the month and although Rusk recommended that the President should see him, Johnson was reluctant. McGeorge Bundy reminded the President, via Jack Valenti, why in his view the President should see Stewart if only for a few minutes:

> Amongst other things, it seems pertinent to note that this is Stewart's first trip to the United States as Foreign Secretary; a bit of red-carpet treatment at the outset of our relationship with this important man might be worth some dividends to us later.[97]

Johnson eventually agreed to Stewart's visit but after Wilson's visit to Washington in April, Johnson postponed a number of state visits to the White House by international dignitaries, including President Ayub Khan of Pakistan and Mr. Shastri, Indian Prime Minister, announcing that he would not be travelling abroad in

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96 *Daily Mail*, 13 March 1965 quoted in Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 13 March 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. III, Cables 2/65-4/65, LBJL

97 Memo from McGeorge Bundy to Jack Valenti, Subject: Appointment with the President - British Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart, 15 March 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 214, UK: Michael Stewart Visit, 3/21/65, LBJL

the foreseeable future because of Vietnam and his heavy legislative programme.[98] The war was beginning to consume the President.

Continuing Pressures on Wilson

By the beginning of March the British government was becoming increasingly frustrated with the Soviet delay in replying to the proposal to approach interested powers regarding Vietnam. As Bruce noted in his diary on 6 March 'the restiveness here, especially in the House of Commons, over the British Government not seeming to play a more active part in trying to induce negotiations over Vietnam, continues.'[99] The previous day, one of the chief left-wing critics of the Government, Mr. Frank Allaun, resigned as Principal Private Secretary to the Colonial Secretary, as he wished to have 'the greater independence' of an ordinary MP. The Labour leadership were desperate to report a development on the negotiation front.

Wilson's problems were also compounded in Cabinet on 4 March when a discussion on the public position of the Government regarding Vietnam elicited 'some disquiet'.[100] Barbara Castle, Minister for Overseas Development, 'once again' raised the problem of Vietnam, a subject that had by then 'been discussed pretty often'.[101] Cabinet records show that by this time the fear was that as long as the Government 'refrained from disclosing the initiative' recently taken, the more Parliamentary unease was likely to continue and grow. Fortunately for Wilson, he was easily able to control Cabinet unrest as many members of its members were still

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98 *The Times*, 17 April 1965, p. 8

99 Bruce diaries, 6 March 1965

100 Cabinet Meeting, 4 March 1965, CAB 128/39, Part 2, PRO

101 Richard Crossman, *The Crossman Diaries: Selections from the Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, 1964-70* (London: Mandarin, 1991), 4 March 1965, p. 86

finding their feet in government. For instance, Richard Crossman, Minister of Housing and Local Government, had not yet spoken on foreign affairs.[102] Consequently, Wilson was well able to convince the Cabinet that behind the scenes he was working hard on the issue and that 'the best course for the time being would be to maintain … diplomatic pressure on the United States Government to agree to a conference of the Powers concerned'.[103]

Wilson knew that he would face sterner questions on Vietnam in the House of Commons on 9 March, and that he had to give some sort of reassurance, to his own Party in particular, that he was not passive on the negotiation front. He would issue the prepared statement on the subject that he had suggested the Americans vet before delivery. The level of influence the US had over the Wilson Government is apparent when one examines the ensuing debate over the statement's content. Bruce's diary entry of 7 March 1965 notes that 'State and the British Embassy, Washington, have attempted to concert language for suggested use by the Prime Minister this week when the Vietnam situation is debated in the House of Commons.' The original suggested text was:

> I can assure the House that we are by no means neglecting our responsibilities as co-chairman of the Geneva Conferences. We have been in touch with the other co-chairman and with the United States and other governments. We are continuing these diplomatic discussions with a view to achieving a peaceful solution. It would not be in the national interest to make a further statement at this time.[104]

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[102] Ibid

[103] Cabinet Meeting, Thursday, 4 March 1965, CAB 128/39, Pt. 2, PRO

[104] Ibid, 7 March 1965

The text then saw a series of revisions. The day before Wilson faced questions in the House, Rusk responded to the latest revised draft statement, telling Michael Stewart of the British Embassy in Washington that 'our first choice remained no statement at all by the Prime Minister' as he feared the Prime Minister's words 'would be advertised as a call by the British for a ceasefire'.[105] Intent on making some mention of the British position regarding peace talks, Wilson began to lose patience with American interference in what was essentially a domestic affair. After making further revisions to his text, the Prime Minister made it clear that he would 'be answering questions in the House of Commons .... in the revised terms suggested but should not invite the State Department to comment further'.[106]

Despite this response, just one hour before Wilson was scheduled to deliver his statement to Parliament, Rusk was still attempting to dictate the wording. The Secretary of State sent a telegram to Philip Kaiser, the US chargé d'affaires in London to say that 'we appreciate British government has a Parliamentary problem and recognize some statement will probably be required'. But

> any reference to 'hostilities' should make a clear distinction between aggression from the North and US efforts to assist in meeting that aggression. We should not object if the Prime Minister would wish to remind the House that the United States had made it clear that American forces in Vietnam could come home if North Vietnam would leave its neighbours alone.[107]

He was particularly concerned that 'Hanoi, Peiping and Moscow be encouraged by any indication of lack of solidarity between United States and United Kingdom' and

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105 Telegram from Rusk to American Embassy, Washington, 8 March 1965, PREM 13/694, PRO

106 Ibid

107 Telegram from Dean Rusk to Philip Kaiser, 9 March 1965, FO371/180582/DV1075/60/G, PRO

insisted that any statement be related to the UK's special role as Co-Chair of the two Geneva conferences.[108]

Furthermore, Rusk's increasing lack of patience with the British led him to tell Kaiser to inform Stewart 'that if he has a political problem at home, so do we, but ours extends to South East Asia'. He also made threats, suggesting that until the British understood the American position on this issue, and therefore adopted their wording, he 'would request that Michael Stewart's visit not be announced until we can arrange more propitious circumstances'.[109] Rusk explained that:

> if the Prime Minister makes a statement tomorrow which cuts across [the] very clear and simple statements of United States policy and, on the same day, announces Michael Stewart is coming to see me at my invitation, I shall be faced with great difficulty in countering the suspicion that vague and alarming moves are in the wind which would signal both to our allies in the Pacific and to [the] Houses of Parliament that we are on the run.[110]

Although Bruce and others fully briefed Rusk on the extent of Wilson's domestic problems on Vietnam, on this occasion little sympathy was shown for his predicament. Wilson recalls in his memoirs that on arriving back from Europe on the afternoon of 9 March, the day of the debate:

> I had just five minutes before going to the chamber for my Question time, during which George Thomson, the Minister of State at the Foreign office, with strong Foreign Office pressure behind him, tried to get me to take a much more committed pro American line on bombing in Vietnam.[111]

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108 Ibid

109 Ibid

110 Ibid

111 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 120

In the end Wilson did reluctantly bend to American will. He acknowledged to Bruce a few days later that 'in response to last minute representations' from Rusk he 'had changed the text of his reply.'[112] His main statement in response to several questions on Vietnam therefore included the words 'aggression by the North' and was as follows:

> .... what would stop the fighting would be a proper observance of the 1954 Geneva Agreements, thus putting an end to the aggression by the North against South Vietnam. As the House knows, we have in our traditional role as Co-Chairman been engaged in diplomatic consultations of a confidential nature. It is the view of Her Majesty's Government that if there is genuine cessation of hostilities, then talks in some form should be started. But for the moment the form is of less account than the basis of the talks. Our main diplomatic efforts have been directed to seeing if the basis exists. As I have already told the House, we have been in touch with the Soviet Government, who were given our views on this problem on 20th February ...[113]

Having given in to barely disguised American threats, Wilson was able to announce to the Commons the Foreign Secretary's visit to Washington on 22 and 23 March, 'when Vietnam will be among the subjects discussed ... Meanwhile, we will continue our diplomatic consultations with a view to achieving a peaceful solution which stands some chance of assuring a lasting genuine settlement. The House will not expect me to say more.'[114]

In domestic, political terms the most controversial answer from the Prime Minister came in response to a question by Mr. Konni Zilliacus, MP, when the extent of change in Wilson's attitude on Vietnam was revealed:

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112 Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the US Ambassador, David K.E. Bruce, 10 Downing Street, 12.15 pm, 12 March, 1965, PREM 13/693, PRO

113 Hansard, 9 March 1965, Vol. 708, Col. 237

114 Ibid

> A year ago, the general supposition was that the fighting in South Vietnam was a spontaneous, so-called nationalist rising on the part of the Viet Cong people. But now there is no attempt at all to deny the responsibility of North Vietnam who have said that they are fighting a war in South Vietnam. That makes a big difference, I think, in terms of our analysis of the problem.[115]

This answer was the last straw for many on the Labour left, who felt Wilson was now completely subservient to the Americans.

There is no doubt, however, that the whole episode further strained an already troubled Anglo-American relationship. This time it was the British Prime Minister who was annoyed. The Americans had intervened with a heavy hand in British domestic politics. Wilson struggled to maintain some independence on this sensitive issue and was, not surprisingly, annoyed at the American interference. In conversation with Bruce, the Prime Minister talked about 'the invidious position' he was in. The Ambassador acknowledged in his diary that 'it is unquestionable that, amongst other things, he resents US officials trying to dictate the terms of his remarks in the House of Commons'.[116] Bruce himself found the incident an unpleasant reminder of Johnson's tendency to play the bully, and consequently undertook his duties in this connection reluctantly. Indeed Bruce told Rusk that he found instructing a foreign head of government what to say to his own parliament, 'a tasteless proceeding'.[117] Given LBJ's sensitivity over Harold Wilson's very tentative "advice" in his late night phonecall, it is, of course, enormously ironic that the President and his advisers wielded a sledgehammer to crack this particular nut.

Although Wilson gave in to American demands, his statement did at least put further

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115 Ibid, Col. No. 238

116 Bruce Diaries, 12 March 1965

117 Nelson D. Lankford, *The Last American Aristocrat: The Biography of David K.E. Bruce, 1998-1977* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1996), p. 331

pressure on the Americans to consider negotiations. The following evening, Manny Shinwell, chairman of the Parliamentary Labour Party, along with Arthur Henderson, Philip Noel Baker, Mr. Bellenger, Michael Foot and Sydney Silverman, tabled a motion on Vietnam:

> That this House, noting the recent declaration made by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, U Thant, which is consistent with the views expressed by the Prime Minister, calls for the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam and a reference of the dispute in Vietnam to a conference of interested parties.[118]

As *The Times*' political correspondent noted, the motion had 'much more domestic and international significance than the surface of the form of words suggests'. The reason for its importance was that it had 'the Government's full backing and almost certainly was initiated by Mr. Wilson himself.'[119] Wilson's Chief Whip in the Commons, Edward Short also thought Wilson was behind the motion believing the Prime Minister looked for 'some compensatory action, which he could take to neutralise the complaints, and hopefully the complainants.'[120] *The Times* assumed two main purposes behind Wilson's involvement in the motion:

> First, and most important, it is intended to remind President Johnson that the British Government have given America loyal support in their Vietnam actions but that there is anxiety in London that some attempt should be made now to achieve a cessation of hostilities. Secondly, the motion is intended to mark out ground on which virtually all members of the Parliamentary Labour Party can stand with Mr. Wilson at a time of delicacy and difficulty. From right to left, pro-American and anti-American, Labour M.P.s are expected to agree that U Thant's declaration calling for a cease-fire in Vietnam and a conference is the right

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118 *The Times*, 11 March 1965, p. 12

119 Ibid

120 Edward Short, *Whip to Wilson* (London: Macdonald and Co. 1989), p. 120

> line for the Government they are keeping in office on a bare overall majority.[121]

With the benefit of the released diplomatic exchanges over the statement, a third purpose can be added. The Prime Minister was attempting to reassert his authority in the domestic affairs of his own country.

Further Escalation of the War

On 12 March rumours began to circulate in the press that President Johnson had decided to prosecute the war in Vietnam with all necessary means. The Prime Minister brought this up at a meeting with David Bruce the same day, insisting that even if the story in *The Times* was not correct, that US policy 'had changed in nature as well as degree.'[122] And while the British Government 'had agreed to support any American response that was measured and specifically related to the provocation', this was no longer the case and 'the United States Government had made the change without consulting their most loyal ally.' He added that this 'would place Her Majesty's Government in an intolerable position; if it were allowed to continue we should soon be hearing stories about satellites and the 51st state.'[123] Wilson was alarmed at the adverse press he was beginning to receive in relation to Vietnam. He referred to the leading article of that week's *New Statesman* which carried the headline 'Vietnam - What's Wilson Waiting For?' The article noted the Prime Minister's apparent 'somersault on Vietnam', calling his change from describing the

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121 *The Times*, 11 March 1965, p. 12

122 Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the US Ambassador, Mr. David Bruce at 12.15 pm , 10 Downing Street, 12 March 1965, PREM 13/693, PRO

123 Ibid

situation in South Vietnam as 'a spontaneous so-called national rising' into an overt war of aggression by North Vietnam, 'sheer impudence'. It argued Wilson 'should stop worrying about incurring American wrath and should take on the role of "honest broker" much as Eden had at Geneva.' The editorial further pointed out that when Wilson:

> referred vaguely to midnight telephone calls, to Mr Gromyko's visit to London and Mr Stewart's plan to go to Washington. This was not good enough. The understanding on which this journal (among others) gave qualified approval to the British government's general support for the American position in Vietnam, was that this was to be accompanied by a process of secret diplomacy, at the highest level, to bring about a conference of the powers involved.[124]

Not surprisingly Wilson informed Bruce, and thereby the Johnson administration, that Her Majesty's Government could abide by the originally planned posture of the US, 'a stick in one hand and an olive branch in the other' but the lack of the latter was extremely dangerous to Anglo-American relations: 'if things went on as they were, they could well lead to the biggest difficulty between Britain and the United States for many years, possibly since Suez'.[125]

Wilson's pleas to Bruce regarding the lack of appreciation in the US for his position may have had some effect. Later in the month, David Klein, a White House aide, voiced his feelings about relations with the British in a top secret, sensitive memorandum to McGeorge Bundy. He argued that the

> firmest public support from <u>any</u> government on our policy in Vietnam has come from the British. This, despite the fact that

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[124] *New Statesman*, 12 March 1965, p. 1

[125] Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and David K.E. Bruce, US Ambassador, 10 Downing Street, 12 March 1965, PREM 13/693, PRO

> Vietnam is a difficult issue for any British Government, and especially a Labor Government.... I think I understand the reasons for some of the pique with the P.M. here. But I honestly doubt that this in itself is sufficient justification for the way we are handling the P.M.

In a handwritten note on the memo, Bundy said he agreed with this and had 'made this point with some effect for the time being'.[126]

Meanwhile the Foreign Office was still perplexed by rumours that Washington was annoyed with British attempts to foster peace talks.

> Her Majesty's Government have kept in close touch with the US Government in London and Washington as far as immediate policy is concerned, and have at no stage opposed the policy being followed by the United States, but rather by suggesting minor changes in timing or presentation from time to time, have acquiesced in it.[127]

Even Bruce recognised that Wilson's support of American policy was a 'blank check endorsement' and explained to the President the difficulties the Prime Minister was having because of this.[128]

The press again picked up on the tension between the United States and its allies, including Great Britain, from comments made by George Ball, Under-Secretary of State, during a State Department conference on March 16. According to *The Times'* Washington Correspondent, Ball criticised those allies who had urged the United States to negotiate a peaceful settlement in Vietnam. The trouble with most Western European nations, he said, was that they had little experience in exercising

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[126] Memo from David Klein to McGeorge Bundy, 23 March, 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, Vol. III, Memos, 2/65-4/65, LBJL

[127] Minute, South East Asia Department, 15 March 1965, PREM 13/694, PRO

[128] Bruce diaries, 20 March, 1965

far-flung responsibility except when defending empires. Now those had gone, they should develop a whole new set of attitudes.

> To play a useful and effective role on the world stage it is not enough for a nation simply to offer advice on all aspects of world affairs. It should be prepared to back that advice with resources .... When national positions are vigorously promoted without regard to their effect on the responsible common efforts of other states, free world interests may well be injured ...

The Times concluded that the sum of the speech was that European nations had no right to be concerned about the prospect of American bombings provoking Chinese intervention and another global conflict. This was another example of what it called the super-power complex: 'While Western Europe remains a sub-tribal group of pygmies it must do as it is told or be quiet, and apparently only super-powers have a right to be heard.'[129]

If it was hoped that the rumblings of discontent between the US and its closest ally would abate with the British Foreign Secretary's visit to Washington, events would later dash these hopes.

Visit of Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart to Washington, 21-24 March 1965

During the preparations for Stewart's formal visit to Washington in March and Wilson's informal visit in April, both Washington and London recognised that Vietnam would dominate these meetings. Some sort of 'understanding' had to be reached between the two governments as neither felt its position was fully comprehended by the other and the issue was threatening to cause a serious rift in the

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[129] Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 17 March 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. III, Cables, 2/65-4/65, LBJL

Anglo-American relationship. The South East Asia Department of the Foreign Office felt that Stewart should pursue with Mr. Rusk the fundamental question of 'whether American military policy in Vietnam is aimed at inducing the North-Vietnamese to negotiate or to capitulate'.[130]

By the middle of March the Johnson administration had come to the conclusion that it would not actively seek formal negotiations on Vietnam until it was in a stronger military position from which to deal. As far as Washington was concerned, the introduction of large numbers of ground troops would provide this necessary strength. In the meantime, it would appear to be seeking peace, by stressing that the North Vietnamese had only to leave South Vietnam alone for there to be a solution. In the meantime, it could keep 'quiet channels' via the UK and other third parties 'open for hopeful signs'.[131] The White House was confident that it could call on the Geneva Conference as and when it wanted to. But, because Rusk in particular wanted 'to keep the British just happy enough to hold them aboard', the Johnson administration would encourage the British to pursue their fellow co-Chair on Vietnam.[132] The White House considered this position shortly before Stewart's planned talks on 23 March with Johnson and Rusk, mainly because it was apparent that 'only one serious question' was likely to arise, 'the political problem of the Wilson Government in holding to its present support for us in Vietnam'.[133]

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130 Secretary of State's Visit to Washington and New York, 21-24 March, Brief No. 12, 17 March 1965, FO371/180584, PRO

131 Paper prepared by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (McNaughton), 10 March 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume II, p. 43

132 Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, 6 March 1965, FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume II, p. 404

133 Memorandum from the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, 22 March 1965, in FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume II, p. 468

McGeorge Bundy informed the President that the British position was 'not tenable without some slight help from us' and suggested two possible options:

> one course might be to let the … Labor Party struggle with its own political problems, on the ground that Wilson's troubles are of his own making, not ours. The difficulty with this course is that since Wilson prefers his own survival to solidarity with us, he would be mortally tempted to begin to make critical noises about us, thus appealing both to his own party and to the natural nationalism of many independent Englishmen.[134]

The other alternative was to work out what was the 'least' Washington could offer 'in return for continued solidarity in support of the essentials of our policy in Vietnam'.[135] According to Bruce this could be as little as joining the British 'in saying publicly that there is a full and continuous exchange of views and of information at all levels between our two Governments on this important issue'. Additionally, the White House could 'put on some parsley' about how glad they were to receive Stewart and how much they were looking forward to the Prime Minister's visit.

> In return, the British should undertake not to advocate negotiations and not to go back on their existing announced approval of our present course of action. They should limit themselves to expressions of hope that a path to a peaceful settlement will come, plus expressions of alertness, as Co-Chairman of the Geneva Conference, to any opportunities … which may develop in the future.[136]

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134 Ibid

135 Ibid

136 Ibid, p. 469

The contempt for Wilson and his problems is apparent in this document. However, there is also an implied recognition that the US did not really want to risk losing British support on Vietnam and that it was therefore willing to make at least some effort to help Wilson with his domestic problems if the British did not publicly pressurise them on the negotiation front.

Stewart's visit to Washington was to take on further significance as his arrival coincided with two important developments in Vietnam. On 22 March the US Defense Department announced that in addition to the use of napalm bombs it was also using a type of gas in Vietnam. On the same day, Maxwell Taylor, US Ambassador in South Vietnam, made a statement admitting 'no limit existed to the potential escalation' of the war.[137] The threat of a ground war in Vietnam, with the attendant risks of Chinese intervention, and the use of nuclear weapons, suddenly looked within the American purview. Not surprisingly, and justifiably, alarm bells rang in the House of Commons. Immediately, six senior members of the Parliamentary Labour Party, led by the Chairman of the Party's Foreign Affairs Committee, Philip Noel-Baker, sent a telegram to Stewart in Washington urging him to express British 'horror and indignation' at the latest events.[138] A protest resolution was also put on the Order Paper of the House of Commons. Michael Foot MP wrote later that week that 'the blaze of anger about ... Vietnam which swept through the Parliamentary Labour Party this week was hotter than anything felt there for a long time'.[139]

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137 Wilson , *Labour Government*, p. 122

138 Ibid

139 *Tribune*, 26 March 1965, p. 5

If Wilson's memoirs are to be believed, the Prime Minister was also personally shaken by these events. His response to them seems to confirm this recollection. When Stewart arrived in Washington a telegram was awaiting him warning him to make no public statement until the following day. In the meantime Wilson grappled with the wording of two emergency telegrams on 'the issue itself and its handling' and 'on the domestic political aspects'. Wilson spent the evening dictating and repeatedly strengthening their terms. He eventually suggested Stewart raise two further issues, in addition to questioning the use of gas and Taylor's inflammatory remarks. First, he should mention the press suggestion that instead of the planned bombing missions - which had themselves escalated far beyond measured tit-for-tat raids - American pilots would soon be permitted to range freely, selecting their own targets. Second, he should assert that the British had it from an authoritative source that US military authorities in Saigon had a plan for the next month involving continuing escalation.[140]

Wilson told Stewart that Rusk 'should be left in no doubt about the strength of feeling here and about the difficulties which we are facing. There is a danger of widespread anti-Americanism and of America losing her moral position.'[141] As the British press were quick to note, this latest action placed 'the propaganda battle on a plate to the Communists.' Wilson was therefore furious that 'Her Majesty's Government were given no, repeat no, warning that these actions were

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[140] Personal Telegram from the Prime Minister to Foreign Secretary, Washington, 23 March 1965, PREM 13/693; Draft Telegram from the Prime Minister to the Foreign Secretary, PREM 13/693, PRO

[141] Draft Telegram from the Prime Minister to the Foreign Secretary, PREM 13/693, PRO

contemplated.'[142] The attacks on Wilson were beginning to worry the Prime Minister:

> It is becoming harder and harder for us, if the facts seem to support the jibe I have already had to put up with that Her Majesty's Government is the tail-end Charlie in an American bomber and I hope that more thought will be given to the wider aspects of these questions.[143]

Wilson assumed that Stewart would reply appropriately if President Johnson tried to link this question with support for the pound. The Prime Minister felt it would be 'most unfortunate' if Britain's 'financial weakness ... be used as a means of forcing us to accept unpalatable policies or developments regardless of our thoughts'. It would raise 'very wide questions indeed about Anglo-American relationships'.[144] Despite this unease at this latest crisis, Wilson told Stewart that Britain would 'not depart from the general Viet Nam line which we have taken.'[145]

According to Wilson, Stewart spoke to Rusk and Johnson 'in the strongest terms'.[146] The British record of the conversation between the British Foreign Secretary and the US Secretary of State on the morning of 23 March adds weight to this assertion. Indeed, Stewart repeated much of what Wilson dictated in his telegrams. When Rusk opened his talks with Stewart by saying the important question was what useful diplomatic step could be made next, the Foreign Secretary refused to be side-stepped and interrupted him saying there was an 'immediate' question which he must raise - the strong feelings felt in the UK and elsewhere about

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142 Telegram 2328 Personal for the Foreign Secretary from the Prime Minister Emergency Confidential, 23 March 1965, PREM 13/693, PRO

143 Ibid

144 Draft Telegram from the Prime Minister to the Foreign Secretary, PREM 13/693, PRO

145 Personal Telegram from the Prime Minister to the Foreign Secretary, 23 March 1965, PREM 13/693, PRO

146 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 123

the use of gas and the Prime Minister's intention to inform the House of Commons, if asked, that he had not been consulted about it. In reply, Rusk played the innocent, saying he could only tell the British Government what they themselves knew: that the US Government had not known about this particular use of gas and his belief was that it was the kind used for riot control purposes. He acknowledged, however, that the matter had been badly handled but 'expressed regrets' that Mr. Noel-Baker had acted 'so impetuously in sending his protest before the full facts were known. If the United States Government had operated in that way they would have landed themselves in a dozen world wars by this time.'[147]

The Americans did not understand fully British concerns over the use of gas - Bundy called it a 'stupid fuss'.[148] Indeed Rusk later pointed out to Stewart that it was non-lethal gas and had been used by the British during civil disturbances.[149] Wilson and Stewart were concerned about gas and napalm bombs inflicting 'undue suffering' and were in any case of 'limited military use'.[150] And as Rusk acknowledged, the revelation of its use was a public relations disaster.

On General Maxwell Taylor's comments about there being no limits to the escalation of the war in Vietnam, Rusk confirmed the US was unwilling to impose limits on its own action but repeated that escalation depended on what the other side did. However, he reassured Stewart that at present there were no plans to bomb the Hanoi area and Her Majesty's Government would be informed in advance if the

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147 Record of a Conversation between the Foreign Secretary and Mr. Dean Rusk, the US Secretary of State, at the State Department, Washington at 10.30 am, 23 March 1965, PREM 13/693, PRO

148 Memo, Bundy to the President, 22 March 1965, FRUS, 1964-68, Volume II, p. 469

149 Cabinet Minutes, 25 March 1965, CAB 128/39 Pt. 2, PRO

150 Record of a Conversation between the Foreign Secretary and Mr. Dean Rusk, the United States Secretary of State, at the State Department, Washington, at 10.30 am, 23 March 1965, PREM 13/693, PRO

United States were thinking of bombing there or making any major changes in United States policy.[151]

Stewart was scheduled to meet the President the same afternoon. However, on his return from Texas, Johnson postponed his meeting with the British Foreign Secretary until the next day. This meant that Stewart would meet with the President just half an hour before facing, as Bruce put it, the ordeal of a lunch and speech at the National Press Club. The Ambassador met with Bundy to try to resolve this 'ticklish matter'. Bruce thought Johnson's reluctance to meet with Stewart was related to the fact that the President

> has an antipathy for the Prime Minister. He regards attempts on the part of the British to insinuate themselves into Vietnamese affairs as irrelevant and unimportant. He believes Wilson, for his own domestic political purposes, wishes to capitalize on a supposed close relationship with Johnson that is non-existent.[152]

Bruce and Bundy saw 'eye to eye' on the situation, feeling that Wilson needed to at least be able to portray to his associates and the House of Commons, 'the appearance of an intimacy and a mutual confidence that, in the President's view, is not a reality'. To Bruce there was 'no room ... for lack of conventional courtesies between chiefs of allied states.'[153] The same day, Rusk also pressed LBJ in a similar vein, this time recommending a lunchtime meeting between the President and the Prime Minister during the latter's forthcoming trip to Washington:

> We have an excellent degree of understanding and cooperation in crucial foreign policy matters from the new Labor

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151 Ibid

152 Bruce diaries, 22 March 1965

153 Ibid

> Government in Britain. Anything we can do to maintain this state of affairs is in our best interests.[154]

An approach to the President was 'concocted' that would 'preserve at least an outward harmony' in his meeting with Stewart. LBJ met with Stewart alone at 11.30 am for about fifteen minutes, at which point the diplomatic entourage of advisers, press officers and diplomats joined them. As both the President and the Foreign Secretary had strict engagement schedules, both were constantly reminded by their aides of time limitations. Nevertheless, according to Bruce, the President was in 'talkative form'.

> It was great theatre, he fed us oratorical sandwiches, with layers of gravity and levity. At one time, after he had enumerated the variety of criticisms to which he was daily subjected over Vietnam, he remarked 'sometimes I just get all hunkered up like a jackass in a hailstorm'.

Despite Johnson's garrulity, according to Bruce, Stewart 'kept reverting to the uproar in Britain over the use of non-lethal gas by the South Vietnamese air force'. This 'attack' was easily handled by the President, who gave a rendition of Rusk's arguments about the gas being stocked and used by many countries for quelling riots. Johnson discoursed for more than an hour, 'explaining his objectives, hopes and fears', including the fierce domestic pressures on him. According to Bruce, the President was 'power sublimated, like Niagara Falls ... I think he impressed his audience by his grasp of the issues involved, and his own mastery over decisions, but must have puzzled the British by the alternation of his manner'. After photographs, Bruce records that Stewart 'was released, after ninety minutes of an experience he is

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[154] Memo, Rusk to the President, 22 March 1965, NSF, Country, UK, Wilson Visit, 4/15/65, LBJL

never likely to forget'. After the Foreign Secretary had left, LBJ said Stewart 'had not offered a single practical or helpful suggestion, nor had General deGaulle, or any other foreigner'.[155]

Notwithstanding the President's best efforts, after leaving the White House, Stewart went directly to the National Press Club where he criticised the American use of gas in Vietnam. And, although Stewart had informed the President that he would repeat his concerns publicly, it was soon reported that Johnson was 'furious' with Stewart and that his reaction had been 'sulphurous'.[156] Apparently the President considered sending a rebuke to Wilson but decided against it; something Bruce was glad of as he considered it 'undignified and unnecessary' to do so.[157]

Overall, Wilson was delighted with Stewart's handling of the gas affair, characterising it as 'the bluntest straight-talking Britain had indulged in in Anglo-US relations since the war.' He believed it not only 'won the approval of Labour MPs' but also made a real impact on the President.[158]

Ultimately, the gas episode demonstrated to Washington that the Labour Government was beginning to place limits on its diplomatic support of America's Vietnam policy. Wilson and Stewart were beginning to discriminate between the means and the ends. In an attempt to balance their need to be a loyal ally to the Americans with the need to placate the left-wing of the Labour Party, the British would support the US aims in Vietnam, but reserve the right to object to their methods of achieving success there.

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155 Bruce diaries, 23 March 1965

156 Daily Mail, 23 March 1965 in Telegram from Kaiser to Rusk, "Vietnam: British Press", 23 March 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. III, Cables, 2/65-4/65, LBJL

157 Bruce diaries, January-March 1965 in Editorial Notes, FRUS, 1964-68, Vol. II, p. 481

158 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 123

The New Approach - Going it Alone as Geneva Co-Chair

When the Russians replied negatively to the British proposal to consult with other Geneva powers on Vietnam, London and Washington began to consider the possibility of a new kind of initiative. Due to their domestic, political difficulties, Wilson and Stewart knew they would have to be seen to be pushing hard on the negotiation front, especially given the intensification of the conflict. Consequently, by the time of Stewart's visit to Washington the British knew they would have to undertake a unilateral approach for peace. They proposed to ask the Geneva powers and members of the International Control Commission (ICC) to express their views on what they saw as the basis for negotiations. The White House was alarmed at the prospect of the British driving the search for negotiations.

Consequently when Rusk discussed diplomatic initiatives with Stewart on 23 March he tried to stall the British government's next move. He told the Foreign Secretary that he was aware many people 'were willing to be a mid-wife to a conference' but said he had no objections to contacts being made to assess the possibilities. However, he thought the US might address its own message to the Geneva Co-Chairs and the members of the International Control Commission containing an 'extensive, reasoned and dispassionate account of South Viet-Nam, Laos and perhaps Cambodia.'[159] This would obviously be a more limited initiative. When Stewart pressed for further details on what such a statement might contain, Rusk said it would refer to the need to respect the 1954 and 1962 agreements.

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[159] Record of a Conversation between the Foreign Secretary and Mr. Dean Rusk, the United States Secretary of State, at the State Department, Washington, at 10.30 am, 23 March 1965, PREM 13/693, PRO

> It would deal with the activities of the North Vietnamese in crossing the frontier into South Viet-Nam ... would express regret that there was no indication from the other side that they were yet ready to stop these incursions. But ... would not spell out ... pre-conditions for a conference because to do so would make everybody muscle-bound.[160]

Stewart thought it 'unfortunate' if the US message made no reference to the possibility of holding a conference, at which point Rusk repeated his belief that he did not want a conference at any cost. He asked the British to postpone their own planned unilateral approach to the parties concerned until they had received a draft of the US' proposed message. Pointedly, Rusk repeated that he was 'happy that Her Majesty's Government should continue as Co-Chairmen but ... did not want to see them playing the role of referee.'[161] In other words, the Secretary of State was reminding London that as an ally, it could not be an impartial judge on Vietnam.

One week later the U.S. administration had still not produced any statement of policy on Vietnam, and the Foreign Office began planning British unilateral action on the lines of the earlier proposal to the Russians. Rather than trying to establish the basis on which negotiations might begin, they would merely seek the views of the Geneva powers. The Americans had in the intervening days thought more closely about how best to appear interested in peace as well as war. They eventually settled on a Presidential statement.

On 25 March, President Johnson delivered a speech on the war. In addition to the usual line on North Vietnamese aggression, he included two important points. Firstly, he declared that the US sought 'no wider war', and secondly that he was

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160 Ibid

161 Ibid

'ready to go anywhere at any time, and meet with anyone wherever there is promise of progress toward an honourable peace.'[162] This speech eased the pressure a little on the Wilson government, and the US government intimated that a further high-level statement was on its way. And, as it had been decided to send Patrick Gordon Walker on a fact-finding mission on Vietnam, for the time being London no longer felt it necessary or desirable to continue with their plans for unilateral action.

Johnson's speech of 25 March provided the Government with useful ammunition, as *The Times* put it:

> the most obvious and likely advantage to the British Government is that, until Mr. Gordon Walker can report his impressions - during, that is, the next three or four weeks at least - criticism from the left-wing of the Labour Party will to some extent be disarmed.[163]

Intraparty difficulties were also eased when the US Embassy in Saigon was bombed, resulting in 13 fatalities and 183 injuries.[164] According to the Americans, this incident was 'extensively and sensationally reported in the British press' and made a 'profound impression' in the United Kingdom that 'largely erased emotional reaction to US use of non-lethal gas'. After a debate on Vietnam in the House on 30 March, Philip Kaiser at the US Embassy in London was able to report to the Secretary of State that there was strong bi-partisan support for US policy in Vietnam and that although the hard-core left wing strongly attacked government policy 'along familiar lines', the Labour backbenches 'were not crowded and left-wingers made no attempt to dramatize their opposition'. The atmosphere in the Commons was described as

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[162] The President's News Conference of 4 February 1965, *Public Papers of the President, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965*, (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1966), p. 139

[163] *The Times*, 31 March 1965, p. 12

[164] Ibid

'quiet except for [the] ejection of two protesting youths from [the] public gallery at the debate's end.'[165] He concluded by commenting that the Labour left-wing had been 'temporarily driven underground' and that the Prime Minister impressed as the 'undisputed master in his own house'.[166]

Wilson believed the British government's pressure on the United States for public statement of its position regarding its hopes for peace was instrumental in forcing the Johnson administration's hand.[167] And, clearly part of the reason for the President's statement was the fear in the White House and State Department that the British might start a momentum for peace that they were not ready for, or the Labour government might give away military information as a result of its initiatives.

The First Peace Gimmick? – Patrick Gordon-Walker's Tour of South East Asia

When the British government proposed that the former Foreign Secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker, should visit South East Asia on a fact-finding mission, Washington felt that it should neither approve nor disapprove this action. This was because, as William Bundy put it:

> for us specifically to approve would indicate to many that he might be going on our behalf and that we were pressing for negotiations without any sign that the other side is interested in a peaceful settlement. On the other hand, we would not wish to disapprove an effort by our ally who carried on the trip we would expect to say that we were informed and that we understand the visit is connected with Britain's responsibilities as a Co-Chairman, as discussed by the Prime

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165 Telegram from Kaiser to Rusk, 1 April, 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. III, Cables, 2/65-4/65, LBJL

166 Ibid

167 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 123

Minister in the House of Commons.[168]

The Americans did not attach much importance to the Gordon Walker visit, except in that it would help defuse the anger within the House of Commons.[169]

Gordon Walker planned to visit the South East Asian capitals of Saigon, Phnom Penh, Toyko, Delhi, Vientiane, Rangoon, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Hanoi and Peking from mid April until early May.[170] At this point, it was hoped that the former Foreign Secretary would be able to establish whether a basis for a peace settlement existed.[171]

A Conference on Cambodia

After the furore over the use the gas, and recognising the world-wide suspicion that the US was not pursuing peace to the extent it was intensifying the conflict, the US administration began to go on propaganda offensive. On 7 April Johnson made another major statement on Vietnam that put the US into the role of potential peacemaker. The Baltimore speech, as it became known, was according to Johnson influenced by an outside development. On 1 April, the leaders of 17 non-aligned nations appealed to the US, North and South Vietnam, the Secretary General of the United Nations, and other interested parties and governments, to start negotiations 'as soon as possible, without posing any preconditions'.[172] The next day at a pre-arranged National Security Council meeting, Johnson and Rusk discussed the

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168 Telegram from British Embassy, Washington to Foreign Office, 28 March 1965, "Mr Gordon Walker's Visit to South East Asia, PREM 13/304, PRO

169 Memo for the Record, 13 March 1965, NSF, Files of McGeorge Bundy, Boxes 18 & 19, Memos for the Record, 1964, LBJL

170 Brief No. 3, 30 March 1965, NATO Ministerial Discussions, 31 March-1 April, Vietnam - Talking Points, FO371/180585, PRO

171 Ibid

172 Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 580

proposal and decided the US reply should be 'serious, restrained, and positive'.[173] Johnson decided to give the main elements of his reply during a speech at Johns Hopkins University. The broadcast went out live at 9 p.m. and contained two important passages - one regarding peace negotiations; the other regarding future economic aid to Vietnam. Johnson listed the essential elements of a just peace: an independent South Vietnam that was 'securely guaranteed and able to shape its own relationships to all others - free from outside interference - tied to no alliance - a military base for no other country'. And most crucially, Johnson said that the US remained ready for 'unconditional discussions'. He then went on to propose a billion dollar American investment in South East Asia once peace had come to the region.[174]

Johnson's speech was welcomed by the British. In public, Wilson described it as a 'statesmanlike and imaginative approach to the serious situation in Vietnam'.[175] In private, it was praised for placing 'equal emphasis on the stick and the carrot' and for introducing 'a new and more hopeful element in the situation'.[176] In some ways, the Baltimore statement temporarily eased Wilson's position in the House of Commons as he could now quote the US's readiness for talks. However, although the majority of backbenchers regarded the President's offer of 'unconditional discussions' as conciliatory, and a major breakthrough in the search for peace in Vietnam, they also took some credit for the 'change' in Washington policy. This belief in the success of their sustained pressure through parliamentary motions, meant that they felt the Prime Minister should now 'maintain and intensify British

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173 Ibid, p. 133

174 Ibid

175 Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 8 April 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. III, Cables, 2/65-4/65, LBJL

176 M. Stewart (UK Embassy, Washington) to E.H. Peck, 9 April 1965, FO371/180685/DV 1076/20; Cabinet Minutes, 8 April 1965, CAB 128/39 Pt. 2, PRO

efforts' to persuade all those involved in Vietnam to achieve a ceasefire and begin talks.[177] So, in some ways, Johnson's speech made Wilson's domestic problems even more acute by creating an air of unjustified expectations about the British potential to influence US policy.[178]

Sir Patrick Dean judged the purpose of the speech to be 'primarily to strengthen the position of the United States vis a vis their allies and the non-aligned nations and to put the onus for continuation of the fighting in South Viet Nam on the Communists'. He also advised against 'putting forward a large list of alternative steps' too soon as the Americans would want time to 'test the response of the other side and to assess reaction world-wide'. He suggested that the best way of 'leading the Administration and in particular the President to consider seriously the possibilities' the British had in mind 'would be for the Prime Minister himself to initiate the discussion when he sees the President on 15 April'.[179]

London was, however, quick to see this latest development in Washington as an opportunity to follow-up on a seemingly genuine proposal made by the Soviet Government on 3 April. The Russians had asked Britain to agree to a message being sent by them, as Co-Chairs, inviting the members of the 1954 Geneva Conference to take part in a new one on Cambodia. The Chinese had agreed to take part. The British were willing to consider this, especially if it might prove an indirect route to discussing Vietnam. The trick was to persuade the Americans of the desirability of this approach.

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177 Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 9 April 1965, NSC, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. III, Cables, 2/65-4/65, LBJL

178 *The Sun* and *The Guardian*, 8 April 1965 in Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 9 April 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. III, Cables, 2/65-4/65, LBJL

179 Telegram from Patrick Dean to Foreign Office, 9 April 1965, FO371/180485, PRO

Wilson's Visit to Washington, April 14-15 1965

During the week between Johnson's Baltimore speech and Wilson's visit to the US, preparations were being made on both sides of the Atlantic for the ostensibly informal, yet very important meeting. Wilson's two-day visit to New York and Washington, postponed from February, was intended to be a follow-up to Wilson's discussions with the President in December. The two main items on the agenda - both publicly and privately - were the British economic position and Vietnam. Wilson records that by the time of his visit to Washington, 'President Johnson, in the course of now affable exchanges, appeared ... most ready to discuss the Vietnam situation with me.'[180]

Once the President had helped assuage world opinion via the Johns Hopkins speech, and with future escalation in mind, the Johnson administration began to think in terms of a quid pro quo. On 9 April Sir Patrick Dean warned London that it was evident from recent conversations with senior officials in the White House and State Department that, 'the President is still very anxious to see a greater participation on the ground in South Viet Nam from America's Allies, including ourselves'. The arrival of South Korean troops in South Vietnam had been the most recent 'more flags' development.[181] Australian troops would also be despatched very shortly. Contacts suggested that the Americans envisioned a number of British options from the 'provision of ... military advisers or transport pilots, to a medical team or an expert British team to help in the handling of the growing refugee problem, or again

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180 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 134

181 Briefing Paper, "Visit of British Foreign Secretary - Situation in Southeast Asia", NSF, Country File, UK, Box 214, UK, Michael Stewart Visit, 3/21/65, LBJL

more police advisers'.[182] Despite his own protestations about British commitments in Malaysia and the difficulties of recruitment, the British Ambassador thought it 'very possible' that either the President or the Secretary of State would bring the subject up 'again' during the Prime Minister's visit the next week, believing 'a practical demonstration of further help from us however limited would be valuable'.[183] Dean thought

> a willingness to consider additional help might pay quite disproportionate dividends in terms of our ability to influence United States policies, and I hope that the Prime Minister would be willing to say that he is at least prepared to see what more we can do.[184]

Pressure on Wilson to consider increasing the British contribution in Vietnam also came from diplomats in Saigon. Gordon Etherington-Smith, the British Ambassador in South Vietnam, advised the Foreign Office on 12 April that 'a limited increase in our aid is desirable if we are to retain influence in this theatre with Americans as well as Vietnamese'.[185] His reasoning was that other countries had recently increased their contributions while the British effort had appeared to have diminished. The British Advisory Mission in Vietnam had run into difficulties as its advice to the Americans was no longer taken seriously.

Etherington-Smith evaluated the various possible ways Britain could help. He was 'doubtful' about the wisdom of volunteering to help the Vietnamese refugee problem as this was a risky project: 'It is quite possible that the refugee situation

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182 Telegram from Patrick Dean to Foreign Office, 9 April 1965, Prime Minister's Visit: Vietnam, PREM 13/694, PRO
183 Ibid
184 Ibid
185 Ibid

may present a major problem in the months to come and if we tried to help the Vietnamese we might well be blamed if things went wrong'.[186] He also considered a material contribution to be 'costly, and, having regard to the immense American effort, would soon be forgotten.' Therefore, the 'only form of help ... worth considering would be to send an expert or small qualified team here for a short time to advise the Vietnamese Government on handling the problem.' It would be essential that any such advisers be assured of full American support and local cooperation, something that had been lacking with the British Advisory Mission.

> I still believe that the field in which we can not only help most effectively but earn most American appreciation is that of police training. A substantial increase in [the] present BRIAM team would not only be valued by [the] Americans here but would also be a direct contribution to the development of an effective participation programme and hence to defeat of the Communists [sic] threat. [187]

The Foreign Office were right to be worried about London's credibility with the White House, especially the Prime Minister's. The Secretary of State was defending the British record to the President saying that the British Government's support for US policy in Vietnam had been 'stronger than that of our other major allies' and had been 'skillfully conducted and stoutly maintained by the Prime Minister'. Rusk also advised the President that his Johns Hopkins speech and Patrick Gordon Walker's mission had helped relieve the pressure on the Prime Minister.

The President's face-to-face meeting with Wilson would have the same result.[188]

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186 Ibid

187 Ibid

188 Memo, Bundy to the President, 14 April 1965, NSF, Country File UK, Vol. 9, LBJL

Rusk therefore felt that during the Prime Minister's visit to Washington the President should indicate appreciation for his support on Vietnam.

London was also increasingly aware of Johnson's touchiness on Vietnam generally. An insight into the President's mood at this time, and his feeling towards Britain and Vietnam, was gained during the presentation of the credentials of Sir Patrick Dean, the new British Ambassador to the United States on 13 April.[189] This ceremony at the White House took place just two days before the Prime Minister was due in Washington, and was described by Dean as 'very interesting and to some extent embarrassing'. Dean recorded that after a few preliminary remarks to the Chilean and Danish Ambassadors, who were also being appointed that day, the President 'plunged straight into a discussion with me about British affairs and policy'. He spoke of the strong feelings in Congress and in the United States that America's friends should give them more support in Vietnam. In particular, he

> strongly criticised the attitude of the Labour back bench in Parliament and said that although he was at all times ready to listen to what his allies had to say, he would not be deterred by purely negative opinion. [190]

In what appears to have been a typical Johnson ranting session, according to Dean, the President protested that he was,

> not a murderer, nor did he seek to wage war. The bombing by American aircraft had been carried out against strictly military targets - against steel and concrete as he put it - not even against military factors, still less towns. No women or children had been killed and the sole purpose was to prevent the supply of arms to those who were attacking South Viet-Nam. These bombing attacks against only strictly

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[189] Dean went on to establish a close relationship with Johnson.

[190] Condensed Record of a Meeting with President Johnson at the White House on April the 13th on Presentation of His Credentials by Sir Patrick Dean, PREM 13/694, PRO

defined military objectives contrasted strongly with the bombing attacks carried out on the ground against people sleeping in barracks and still more against Embassies. In these and other Communist bombing attacks innocent women and children had been killed, but no one seemed to mind that. All the complaints were against the American military bombing only.[191]

The President could not resist making a barbed attack on the British government regarding recent complaints about the American use of gas, which 'was not poisonous gas anyway and which the British had used just as frequently. In any case, the British were forced to kill quite a few Indonesian infiltrators every day and he made no complaint. He said that his friends and allies should certainly state their views, but they should not stab him in the back or slap him in the face.' At this point the President 'slapped his own face quite vigorously.' Dean pointed out that however much the President 'might resent some of the attacks from the extreme Left Wing on American policy, he had received and was receiving staunch support from the British Government and people.' Johnson admitted and acknowledged that he 'equally resented some of the ill-informed criticism which he was receiving in his own country'.[192]

Dean recognised that he had been subjected to an 'impressive performance' by Johnson, who had known full well that the public nature of their meeting precluded any serious dissent from the new Ambassador. Dean's silence in the face of such verbal onslaughts may, however, explain why the President went on to develop a fondness for the British Ambassador. Dean concluded his report of the ceremony, saying it had been 'an invigorating experience and of peculiar interest. It revealed in a remarkable fashion how strongly the President feels about the situation

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191 Ibid

in Viet-Nam and how extremely sensitive he is to any form of criticism, particularly that of a negative character even though he acknowledged that he was receiving more than satisfactory support from H.M.G.'[193] The British were, therefore, well aware that the subject of Vietnam would have to be handled with some delicacy by Wilson.

The Prime Minister arrived in Washington in confident mood after delivering a 'robust' speech to the Economic Club at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. He had also met with U Thant at the UN Headquarters on the morning of 14 April, when they discussed the situation in Vietnam, amongst other things. Wilson was met by Rusk at the airport and went straight into talks with the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Fowler at 11.15 am.

The Prime Minister then met with the President, who began their talks by commenting positively on Wilson's speech to the Economic Club and on Britain's economic position in general. Washington was pleased with Wilson's 'evident determination' to defend the pound without devaluation and hopeful that the measures taken in Labour's latest budget would help put the British economy on a sounder footing. It was acknowledged that world liquidity remained a problem and this was discussed at some length. The conversation then moved on to Vietnam. According to Wilson's official record of the meeting, the President began by expressing his 'very deep appreciation of the line we had taken on Vietnam'. Yet again Wilson gave the President a 'short account' of the political difficulties the British government faced on this issue, but thought the President was already 'in no

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[192] Ibid
[193] Ibid

doubt about the problem'. The Prime Minister also acknowledged that 'the position had been transformed both in a world sense and in the British political sense by his Baltimore speech' but felt it necessary to tell the President frankly that 'there had been a real danger that America's image had been suffering'.[194] Johnson replied by summarising the 'agonising decision he had had to take, the pressures he had been under' and said that 'his line throughout had been a middle path between those who wanted to use Vietnam as a jumping-off ground for an all-out attack on China, and those who felt the United States should quit without conditions'. The President said he was taking the 'bomb-plus-olive-branch' line and that his speech at Johns Hopkins University had outlined his 3-D approach: 'determination, discussions and development'. Wilson urged the President to follow up on the discussions part of the equation and that 'immediate action best lie in the Cambodian Conference'.[195]

Wilson noted with some surprise that, 'there was not at any time any suggestion of our committing troops to Vietnam nor any reference to police, medical team and teams to handle the flow of refugees.' It appears, however, that the Prime Minister pre-empted any request by referring to the Australian decision to commit a battalion to Vietnam. Wilson recalls that he said that the British Government 'welcomed this though it added to our Malaysian burdens since although the Australians were partners in Malaysia their contribution was much smaller than ours'.[196] This was another way of reiterating the fact that the British were already over-stretched militarily.

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194 Record of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and President of the United States at the White House on Thursday, 15 April 1965, PREM 13/532, PRO

195 Ibid

196 Ibid

In a luncheon meeting that followed the two men continued their discussion. Johnson was apparently in an 'expansive mood' and Wilson went into further detail on the British domestic situation. Overall, Wilson felt that 'this time our discussion on Vietnam was much more constructive', perhaps in comparison to their late night call of 11 February.[197] This was probably because the Americans had come to the conclusion that there was a danger that the British might stray from the fold. If Wilson felt it was necessary to pursue peace unilaterally, he might do this and by implication join forces with the many other world leaders calling for negotiations, including De Gaulle and U. Thant. And, given British objections over the use of gas and concerns over escalation, it was important to ensure these criticisms remained private. A public divergence on Vietnam would be extremely damaging to the U.S. propaganda effort. It would be better to condone their ally's peace efforts than block them, if only to ensure US views were properly represented. Consequently, Wilson admits in his memoirs that an 'understanding' on Vietnam was reached.

> apart from the occasional moment in future years when President Johnson revived the notion of a British military presence in Vietnam, these April talks set out a division of function which he more than once stressed publicly. The American Government would not be deflected from its military task; but, equally, he would give full backing to any British initiative which had any chance of getting peace-talks on the move.[198]

In the afternoon, there were more detailed discussions on Vietnam in a meeting with the Secretary of State. The talk centred on the issue of a possible conference on Cambodia. Rusk was interested in the proposed conference on

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197 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 135

198 Ibid, p. 136

Cambodia but was 'concerned to ensure that it should not fail ... it would be better that it should not start than that it should fall flat on its face ... a full scale conference which broke down without agreement would be an unqualified disaster'.[199] Rusk reasoned that before accepting the Soviet proposal, a number of possibilities should be considered, including asking Patrick Gordon Walker to ask Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia what he would regard as an acceptable result of the Conference. Consequently, the US Government would 'need a little further time - perhaps no more than 24 hours - in which to co-ordinate their views.'[200] By 20 April there was still a 'fundamental conflict between British and American views on this proposal'. Essentially, the US desired a prior agreement on the documents to be signed at a conference on Cambodia, whereas the British felt 'the longer the Cambodian conference lasts the better, because it will probably be some considerable time before the Communists are ready to discuss Viet Nam seriously'.[201] As it happened, Sihanouk refused the idea of conference anyway, mainly because the rumour went round that it would be used as a pretext for talks on Vietnam. And although the British continued to pursue the idea, invitations to attend a conference were never issued.

The Outcome of Wilson's Visit

Due to the brevity and informality of Wilson's visit, reaction to it was relatively muted. Publicly, the two leaders presented a united front at the obligatory press conference. The President termed his talks with Wilson 'very interesting, very

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199 Record of a Meeting at the White House at 2.30 pm on Thursday, 15 April, 1965, PREM 13/532, PRO

200 Ibid

201 Telegram from Foreign Office to British Embassy, Bangkok, 20 April 1965, PREM 13/694, PRO

cordial, very fruitful' and expressed his high appreciation for 'the friendship and support of our Allies, particularly that of the distinguished Prime Minister and the British people.'

The Times reported that the visit had been 'most useful' and that 'tentative agreements' had been reached on sterling, and on Vietnam.[202] Nothing was said about the personal relationship. Overall, Wilson felt the meeting with the President had been 'very cordial and friendly, pretty fast moving' and recorded that the meeting was 'largely an exchange of views without seeking any new agreements.'[203] Wilson stressed his loyalty to the President on the general aim of US policy in Vietnam but warned that he could only continue with this limited support if he was allowed to deal with domestic criticism through an active role in the peace process. Even though it saw little hope on the negotiation front, the Johnson administration was now willing to allow Wilson to explore publicly the possibilities for peace. This was a price the White House was willing to pay to keep the British on board.

On his visit to Washington, Wilson gave the President two symbolic gifts: a bell from the ship 'Resolute' - LBJ called it a 'unique symbol of the truly close friendship that exists between our two countries'; and a rain repellent raincoat (Ganex mac). The coat was the wrong size and had to be replaced.[204] These gifts were more symbolic than originally intended. Although there was an enduring closeness between the two countries, in the short-term the relationship required readjustments over Vietnam.

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202 *The Times*, 17 April 1965, p. 8

203 Secret. Record of Meeting between the Prime Minister and President of the United States at the White House - Thursday, 15 April 1965, PREM 13/532, PRO

204 Memo for the President for Lloyd, White House Central Files, EXCO305, United Kingdom, 1/1/65, Box 76, 7 May, 1965; Lloyd to President, 14 July 1965, LBJL

CHAPTER 4

MAY-DECEMBER 1965: THE SEARCH FOR AN UNDERSTANDING

The second half of 1965 saw domestic developments in both Britain and the United States impinge upon Anglo-American relations and Vietnam. In the United Kingdom, problems with sterling and a deepening crisis in Rhodesia added to the Wilson Government's dilemma over Vietnam. In the United States, these months witnessed growing domestic upheaval, including further racial unrest and increasing activity on the part of the anti-war movement.

Having secured civil rights legislation outlawing discrimination in employment practices and public accommodation in the summer of 1964, the Civil Rights movement grew impatient for executive action to address voting rights abuses. Protest at Selma, Alabama between January and March had resulted in pressure from President Johnson for the passage of a Voting Rights Act. This Act was eventually signed into law on 6 August 1965. Three days later the Watts district of Los Angeles erupted into riots. When they ended four days later there were 34 dead, 1,000 injured, and extensive property damage. [1] Johnson was unable to comprehend the situation, refusing to take calls from worried Senators and Congressmen. Watching television pictures of looting and burning buildings, the President asked 'how is it possible after all we've accomplished?' As far as LBJ was concerned, he had done all he could for the black community and this was how he was repaid. Once more, a perceived act of disloyalty and ingratitude was taken as a

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[1] Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty? The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 178

personal slight, and would affect his response to black demands for further federal aid for the remainder of his term of office.[2]

The Johnson administration was surprised at the speed with which criticism of the war grew. Although they expected opposition to the war to a be factor if the conflict continued for three years or so, the White House was staggered to find that by mid 1965 the leading anti-war group, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were organising the growing agitation. Washington D.C. began to see organized marches involving tens of thousands of critics of the war. Campus protests were regular occurrences. At this stage, however, the President was most concerned at Congressional criticism of the war, particularly from its conservative element, led by Mississippi Senator John Stennis, who was urging the Administration to take stronger action. A right-wing backlash could jeopardize his entire domestic programme. LBJ felt a personal sense of embattlement over all these developments.

This period also saw the Americanization of the war in Vietnam. In July the United States gave up the pretence of aiding the South Vietnamese government, and took on the military battle themselves, agreeing to send over 100,000 troops to South East Asia. Despite the apparent understanding reached between Johnson and Wilson in the spring, the British Labour government was alarmed by the conflagration and found it ever more difficult to support the methods employed by the US in its efforts to achieve an independent South Vietnam.

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[2] Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1995), p. 112

Patrick Gordon Walker returned from his fact-finding tour of South-East Asia on 4 May. Three days later he presented his findings to Prime Minister Wilson in a lengthy report. In his considered opinion, the United States' general military strategy in Vietnam was right but the British government could be 'critical' of some of their tactics. He was aware that should America's bombing policy fail and South Vietnamese morale collapse again, the Americans might be tempted to bomb Hanoi and other populated centres. Gordon Walker felt that:

> Any such decision would be a great error. It would throw Asian and world opinion against the United States to such an extent as to outweigh any military advantage .... In my view we should let the United States know that if they bombed Hanoi ... they could not count on our support.[3]

While in South East Asia, Gordon Walker had taken every opportunity to let the American authorities know his views on this. Nevertheless, his overall conclusion was that Britain 'must back the Americans in their present operations in Viet-Nam. Their military effort is the only possible policy. An American defeat would be disastrous, even if a victory in the normal sense is unattainable'. He suggested, however, that Britain 'should search for a policy which, while backing America loyally, allows us a certain more apparent independence of view'. One way of doing this would be to:

> let it be known that our analysis of the situation differs somewhat from the Americans. We see more division amongst the Communist forces, less of a solid chain from Peking to the Viet Cong. We would find some support for

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[3] Report by the Rt. Hon Patrick Gordon Walker on his Fact-Finding Tour of South East Asia as Special Representative of the Foreign Secretary, 14 April-4 May 1965, PREM 13/304, PRO

> this attitude in the State Department. We might also indicate what kind of ultimate settlement we envisage. We might, too, make more clear our opposition to the bombing of Hanoi.[4]

He acknowledged, however that 'all this would be a very delicate operation' and 'would probably depend upon America getting into a position of greater strength'.

Wilson thought Gordon Walker's report was 'excellent ... filling a lot of the gaps' and that the report, and therefore the tour, was 'well worthwhile'.[5] This did not mean, however, that the Prime Minister would act upon all of the aforementioned suggestions, despite the fact that at times during the second half of 1965 the United States did appear to improve its military position. Limits placed on British support of American actions in Vietnam still tended to be couched in terms of Labour's internal political difficulties, rather than any open disagreement with the United States on its understanding and execution of the war.

US Pursues the Military Option

The early days of May 1965 saw the Johnson administration concentrating on events in the Caribbean rather than those in South East Asia. On 24 April a faction of the Dominican Republic military attempted to return ex-leader Juan Bosch back to power. Bosch had won the first democratic election held in the Dominican Republic in December 1962, only to be ousted by the military in September 1963. President Johnson, believing the rebel forces had been infiltrated by communists, sent around 20,000 marines to the country in order to prevent 'another Cuba', although claiming

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4 Ibid
5 Ibid

it was to protect American lives. The President received public backing for this apparently successful action which some commentators feel may have encouraged Johnson to believe Vietnam could be a similarly popular anti-communist crusade.[6] The British supported the President in his action.

Shortly before the Dominican Republic crisis, the Johnson administration began to reconsider its options in Vietnam. Johnson's offer to 'go anywhere at any time, and meet with anyone whenever there is promise of progress toward an honorable peace' was later described by Chester Cooper, a member of the National Security Council, as 'merely rhetoric, a public relations holding action'.[7] Although it was made partly to assuage international pleas for a public statement of the US position, it was also a response to the growing domestic protests on the war, including the first 'teach-in' at the University of Michigan on 24 March 1965.[8]

The US was surprised to find that Hanoi responded to the President's offer of 'unconditional negotiations' with the issuance of their own four points. As far as the North Vietnamese were concerned these points remained the basis of their negotiating position for the next three years. They included a demand for the withdrawal of American troops, the cessation of all military alliances, and the insistence on no external interference in South Vietnamese affairs, and none during reunification of the country.[9]

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[6] Joseph S. Tulchin, "US Relations with Latin America", in Warren I. Cohen & Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy 1963-68* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 235-6; Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), p. 63 note.

[7] Quoted in George T. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Garden City, New York Doubleday), p. 324

[8] William L. O'Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960s,* (Chicago: Quadrangle Book, 1971), p. 141

[9] 1. Recognition of the basic national rights of the Vietnamese people - peace, independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity. According to the Geneva agreements, the US Government must withdraw from South Vietnam US troops, military personnel, and weapons of all kinds, dismantle all US military bases there, and cancel its military alliance with South Vietnam... According to the Geneva Agreements, the US Government must stop its acts of war against North Vietnam and completely cease all encroachments on the territory and sovereignty of the DRV [Democratic Republic of

McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara and Dean Rusk decided the US should not respond to this development, at least not until the military situation was sufficiently improved for the US to negotiate from strength. As Marilyn Young argued, at the time 'this logically ruled out any *political* solution to the conflict'.[10]

The Honolulu Conference

On 20 April McNamara chaired a meeting of senior military and civilian advisers in Honolulu to assess the US position in Vietnam. At this stage the Americans had 33,500 of their forces stationed in Vietnam; the President had also recently authorised a change in the Marine role from static defence of base facilities to active, mobile combat roles, although at this stage still in support of South Vietnamese forces.[11]

The conferees reported on 21 April that their strategy for victory was 'to break the will of the DRV/VC by denying them victory' and 'emphasized the critical importance of holding on and avoiding - for psychological and morale reasons - a spectacular defeat of GVN or US forces'.[12] They therefore recommended, and Johnson accepted, further US troop deployments. Immediately an extra 9,000 troops were sent to South Vietnam. On 4 May, LBJ asked Congress to approve a supplemental appropriation of $700 million to meet the increased costs in Vietnam

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Vietnam]. 2. Pending the peaceful reunification of Vietnam, while Vietnam is still temporarily divided into two zones the military provisions of the 1954 Geneva agreements on Vietnam must be strictly respected. The two zones must refrain from entering into any military alliance with foreign countries and there must be no foreign military bases, troops, or military personnel in their respective territory. 3. The internal affairs of South Vietnam must be settled by the South Vietnamese people themselves in accordance with the programme of the [NFL] without any foreign interference. 4.The peaceful reunification of Vietnam is to be settled by the Vietnamese people in both zones, without any foreign interference.

[10] Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945-1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 154

[11] Lyndon Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-69* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1971), p. 141

[12] Ibid

and by the end of June the President had authorised General William Westmoreland to use his forces in combat 'independently or in conjunction with' Vietnamese forces.[13]

At Honolulu, Secretary of Defence McNamara had also recommended that, if possible, allied troops be increased. Obviously, these troops would reduce the numbers of US ground troops being asked for, as well as furthering the image of a multilateral effort. On 29 April Chester Cooper outlined the existing Free World Assistance to Vietnam in a memorandum to McGeorge Bundy. So far only Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, the Philippines and Taiwan had sent military contingents to Vietnam, and most of these troops were non-combatant.[14] The US consequently explored further possible 'third party' support. While the existing contributors presented the best hope for large-scale troop commitments, the Johnson administration again pressured its other friends and allies to contribute 'more flags'. One possible way of engaging the British military in South East Asia lay in asking the Government of Vietnam formally to invoke the SEATO treaty. The tenth meeting of SEATO was due to open in London on 3 May and Washington hoped this might provide an opportunity to announce such a move.

The first draft of the communiqué for this meeting was prepared in advance and outlined this option. Bruce soon informed the State Department that in his view, there was 'no chance of persuading HMG to provide its military forces to SEATO for use in South Vietnam'.[15] The British again stressed their military commitment in Malaysia and their need to appear as impartial as possible in order to fulfil their role

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[13] Ibid, pp. 142-143

[14] McGeorge Bundy Teach-In, May-June 1965, NSF, Files of McGeorge Bundy, Box 18 & 19, LBJL

[15] Telegram, Bruce to Rusk, 27 April 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. III, Cables, 2/65-4/65, LBJL

as Geneva Co-Chair.[16] Under-Secretary George Ball and William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, then met with Patrick Dean to suggest an alternative communiqué on Vietnam 'aimed at trying to meet British problems', it said:

> The Government of the Republic of Viet-Nam requested the Council members to take action under the Treaty to meet the aggression from North Viet-Nam. In light of the Protocol to the Treaty which designates South Viet-Nam as a protected State, the Governments of Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom and the United States agreed that, pursuant to their Treaty obligations and within their capabilities, including their commitments elsewhere, they will take concerted action under the Treaty to meet the Communist aggression in South Viet-Nam. For this purpose they will continue and, wherever possible, intensify actions of the type they have been taking.[17]

William Bundy argued that as the British Government had made clear its support of the Government of Viet-Nam in previous SEATO Council statements, another strong statement 'would not further infringe upon British impartiality'. George Ball agreed that last year's Council communiqué had already committed SEATO members to further action 'in fullfilment of their obligations under the Treaty' and that if the Viet-Nam problem was 'not dealt with forthrightly' by the Council the 'public impression will be created that [the] US is fairly isolated on this issue.'

> We are not pressing for collective action by SEATO as an organization but feel that for Congressional purposes it is essential that SEATO communiqué appear stronger than last year's, particularly in view of [the] fact that in [the]

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16 Wilson apparently said "In Malaysia, we are doing the fighting and the Americans are doing the negotiating... In Vietnam, it is the Americans who are doing the fighting and we who are doing the negotiating." Quoted in William Warbey, *Vietnam: The Truth* (London: Merlin Press, 1965), p. 122

17 Telegram, Rusk to Bruce, SEATO: Council Treatment of Viet-Nam, 29 April 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. III, Cables, 2/65-4/65, LBJL

> intervening year several SEATO members have sent troop contingents to Viet-Nam.

The point was also made that if SEATO could not meet the crisis in Viet Nam the 'question rises as to what purpose [the] organization serves'.[18]

These arguments cut no ice back in London. Michael Stewart told Dean to inform Rusk that in his view 'the amendment suggested ... make this proposal more rather than less objectionable. The proposed last sentence, for instance, would be read as meaning that Britain was urging the United States and South Viet Nam to intensify the bombing of the North'. He further instructed the British Ambassador to make it 'quite clear' that he was 'not prepared to consider anything on the lines of the present proposal' as his objections were to the 'substance of the proposal not merely [the] wording.'[19]

When the Australians and New Zealanders were consulted, they had no real problem with the notion of invoking the SEATO treaty, and agreed to send combat troops. However, after consulting with London they advised the Americans that they would not press the British hard in view of their estimation of British domestic difficulties.[20] The Americans duly shelved the idea. When the 'white man's club' - the United States, Great Britain, New Zealand and Australia - met at a dinner the day before the SEATO meeting was due to start, the US proposal was not openly discussed.[21] After consultation between the Council members, the communiqué that was issued at the end of the SEATO meeting nevertheless provided firm support for US policy in Vietnam; indeed *The Times* felt the Americans 'could hardly have

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[18] Ibid

[19] Telegram, Michael Stewart to Patrick Dean,, 30 April 1965, PREM 13/694, PRO

[20] Telegram, Bruce to State, 1 May 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. IV, Cables, 5/65-6/65, LBJL

[21] George Ball was to attend for the US in the place of Dean Rusk who was busy in talks on the Dominican Republic crisis.

hoped for a more unequivocal diplomatic backing than this'. It talked of 'aggression against the Republic of Vietnam - an aggression organized, directed, supplied and supported by the communist regime in North Vietnam in contravention of the basic obligations of international law and in flagrant violation of the Geneva Agreements of 1954 and 1962.' It also noted 'with grave concern the increasing infiltration of arms and combat personnel from North Vietnam into South Vietnam'. And, in wording suggested by the British, it expressed 'warm support for the policy of the United States Government as outlined by President Johnson on April 7'. It finished by saying that 'until the communist aggression is brought to an end, resolute defensive action must be continued'.[22] Although the US administration had secured a line that would satisfy its congressional critics, it had failed in its latest attempt to extract firmer British support on Vietnam.

The First Bombing Pause

It was at this time, late April and early May of 1965, that the Johnson administration began to give serious consideration to a bombing pause in North Vietnam. Opponents of the air strikes felt that the North Vietnamese would not be persuaded to talk while such American provocation continued. Given the growing criticism LBJ was facing at home over the Rolling Thunder programme, it was felt a break in bombing would 'put the onus on Hanoi' as well as relieving domestic pressure. As with the President's recent offer of 'unconditional discussions', this latest manoeuvre was not expected to lead to negotiations but was another 'time-

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22 *The Times*, 6 May 1965, p. 13

buying device'.[23] Still, George Ball discussed the option of a bombing pause in conversation with Harold Wilson at Downing Street on 5 May. Ball informed the Prime Minister that at this stage the length of a break in the air strikes was not decided upon but the idea was 'to create the impression that the present attacks were not systematic' and 'try to get through signals to Hanoi in order to see whether they were prepared to talk'. Wilson replied a pause in the bombing would be 'an excellent thing to do if the US felt able to do it', but was not sure if the North Vietnamese would respond. In any case, 'if this proposal were carried out and if there were any response from the North, then, once again, the US government would be in a sound moral position'.[24]

On 10 May the President finally decided to end the bombing of the North 'for a limited period'.[25] The following day the US Ambassador in Moscow, Foy Kohler, was instructed to see the DRV Ambassador to convey a message announcing the bombing pause with the request that it be transmitted to Hanoi. The message said there would be no air attacks on North Vietnam from Wednesday 12 May at noon and running into the next week; that this action was 'in response to "suggestions from various quarters, including public statements by Hanoi representatives" that there could be no progress toward peace while air attacks continued.' Just to make clear its position, the US said it was 'well aware of the risk that a temporary suspension of these air attacks may be understood as an indication of weakness' and if it was so misunderstood 'it would be necessary to demonstrate more clearly than

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23 Young, *Vietnam Wars,* p. 155

24 Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and US Under Secretary of State, George Ball at 6.30 pm at 10 Downing Street, 5 May, 1965, PREM 13/694, PRO

25 Johnson, *Vantage Point.* p. 137

ever ... that the United States is determined not to accept aggression without reply'.[26] The threat contained in this message was not revealed to the public until Hanoi Radio broadcast the text in December of that year.[27]

When both the North Vietnamese Embassy and the Soviet Embassy refused officially to receive a copy of the US message (although both were delivered), on 14 May the Americans asked the British if they could convey the message directly to their representative in Hanoi.[28] So on 17 May the British Consul-General duly delivered a copy of the message to the DRV. The message was again returned. According to the Americans 'in view of the negative, indeed hostile, reception by Hanoi to our approach, it was decided to resume bombing at about 0800 hours Saigon time May 18'. The pause had been complete in the North and lasted 5 days and 20 hours from 12-18 May. Bombing of the South had continued unabated.[29] The following day the French reported to the US that the North Vietnamese had told them that Hanoi's 'Four Points' were to be considered as working principles for negotiations rather than prior US conditions.

Growing UK Dissent on Vietnam

By May, America's allies were increasingly uneasy about the lack of consultation they were receiving over Vietnam. Although US officials appeared at times to be confiding in the British over Vietnam, thus giving the illusion of a fair

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[26] Top Secret Report by William J. Jordan, Subject: The Five Day Pause (May 1965), NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 9, File: Marigold-Sunflower, LBJL; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p. 155

[27] Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p. 155

[28] The Soviets appeared not to want to be middlemen in the peace effort at this stage.

[29] Between 1965 and 1968, more than a million tons were dropped on South Vietnam, at least twice the tonnage dropped on the North. Kevin Ruane, *War and revolution in Vietnam, 1930-1975* (London: UCL Press, 1998), p. 75

degree of consultation, in fact the White House was revealing very little about the future direction of its Vietnam policy. Moreover, just as the Johnson administration was being criticised at home for the lack of clarity in its aims in Vietnam, similar doubts were being raised abroad.

On 10 May Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart met with George Ball to discuss a range of foreign policy issues. Again the Under Secretary appeared to be privileging the British on Vietnam by insisting that certain parts of the meeting's record be kept on 'a very restricted basis in view of the delicate position of the US Government in relation to the Government of South Viet-Nam, with whom a number of these points had not been raised.' But the ensuing lengthy and detailed discussion of the possible routes to peace negotiations failed to illuminate American thinking on the subject.

Two days later during a discussion on South East Asia at a restricted session of the NATO Ministerial Council held at Lancaster House, Stewart felt it necessary to tell Dean Rusk:

> that the friends and Allies of the US ought to support American policy in Viet-Nam. But this would be much easier if the US would ensure that her friends and allies were fully informed in advance of American actions in Viet-Nam, of the reasons for these actions and of changes in the American judgement of the situation in Viet-Nam. It was also very important that the objectives of American policy in Viet-Nam should be constantly and publicly repeated.[30]

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[30] Record of a Discussion on South-East Asia in Restricted Session of the NATO Ministerial Council held at Lancaster House, 12 May 1965, FO371/180586, PRO

The US Secretary of State accepted the need for 'more explanation and exposition', noted the request from members of NATO for more information on American activities, and said he would do his best to provide this in future.[31]

The British Government, in particular, wanted the Americans to be more open on Vietnam, not only because it was helpful in their own foreign policy-making, but also due to the growing dissent on Vietnam within and without Parliament. It was vital that Wilson and Stewart appeared to be well informed on Vietnam if they were to continue their policy of public support for the United States, coupled with their reassurance that their influence was being exerted in private. As the United States increased its military involvement in Vietnam, Parliamentary pressure grew. There were major foreign affairs debates centring on Vietnam on 3 June and 19-20 July. On 15 June and 5 July, William Warbey MP also attempted to force an urgent debate on Vietnam. Although he failed in this it was yet another sign of the growing impatience of Labour backbenchers.

The British Government was well aware that it was not only the Labour left wing who were upset by British policy on Vietnam, although these elements remained the most vocal in their opposition to it. Pressure on the Government's Vietnam policy came in many forms. On 11 May the *Daily Mirror* reported an interview with the British police advisers in South Vietnam.[32] According to the *Mirror* journalist, the police said that they were sick of the tortures used by the people who employed them. Emrys Hughes MP asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs if it was now time to bring the advisers home. Instead Mr. Padley, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, answering for Stewart, said the *Mirror* report

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31 Ibid

32 Hansard, 17 May 1965, Vol. 712, Col. 1003

would be investigated. The police admitted to being interviewed but dissociated themselves from the substance of the report. The interview had however already raised the question of police presence, so that Padley was forced to reiterate that it did not represent a British military involvement in Vietnam since the police were in fact civilians.[33] This two week saga was yet another embarrassment for the Government.

Trade unions were also voicing their concerns in greater numbers. By 11 May the Prime Minister admitted to Parliament that he had received 170 resolutions on Vietnam from trade unions. In reply he referred them to his statements in the House. The vast majority of the unions expressed dissatisfaction with the action of the bombing in North Vietnam.[34]

The PLP continued to turn against the Labour leadership on Vietnam. On 26 May, Len Williams, the General-Secretary of the Labour Party, issued a statement on behalf of the National Executive Committee (NEC) that was extremely supportive of the Government's Vietnam policy. It argued that 'the purpose of the Government policy from the outset had been 'to try to get discussion started.' It concluded,

> if success is achieved, it will be due in large measure to the patient and vigorous efforts undertaken behind the scenes by the British Government, efforts that would have been brought to naught if they had taken the advice which was strongly pressed on them, to content themselves with public declarations.[35]

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33 *Daily Mirror* in Hansard, Vol. 712, May 10-24, Written Answer, 17 May 1965, Col. 1003/1004; Hansard, Vol. 713, May 24-June 4, 31 May 1965, p. 153. For a comprehensive coverage of British press reaction to the war, see Caroline Page, 'The Strategic Manipulation of American Official Propaganda during the Vietnam War, 1965-1966, and British Opinion on the War', PhD Dissertation, University of Reading, 1989

34 Hansard, 11 May 1965, Vol. 712, Col. 221/2

35 *Tribune*, 4 June 1965, p. 7

Tribune felt this was a gross distortion of the truth, rightly pointing out that critics of the government were calling for deeds as well as words. The reconvening of the Geneva conference and an end to all British aid to Vietnam were just two concrete suggestions put forward by opponents of the government's policy. William Warbey later recalled that in conversation with him, Wilson had quoted a phrase of Aneurin Bevan's 'to the effect that emotional declarations were a form of "public masturbation", in which responsible statesmen and diplomats could not afford to indulge'.[36] Wilson appeared to be losing touch with his party.

More moderate and intellectual circles were also openly challenging the British government on Vietnam. By the beginning of May, Wilson had been derided by the *New Statesman* as 'President Johnson's Poodle'. Although this was largely in response to Britain's support in the UN of US action in the Dominican Republic, the Prime Minister's seemingly uncritical support of the President's Vietnam policy was also being questioned.[37] The Fabian Society began to criticise Britain's support of American policy in Vietnam in its journal, *Venture*. Editorials expressed disappointment at the new government.

> If even a Labour government cannot be influenced by the course of informed discussion, *Venture's* function becomes merely academic. We are not in business just to comment on the international scene, but to indicate to the Labour Party and to the Labour Government what areas of the world and what policies are due for reappraisal.[38]

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36 Warbey, *Vietnam: The Truth,* p. 111

37 *New Statesman*, Friday, 7 May 1965, p. 1

38 *Venture*, Editorial, April 1965, pp. 2-4

They also pointed out the moral and political dangers of continuing Britain's present policy in Vietnam.

> Opposition to the Vietnam war is not just a left-wing revolt, as some would have us believe, but a major revulsion both in Parliament and in the country against the short-sightedness and brutality of American policy. For the first time since Suez, the roots of popular anti-Americanism have been revealed. This could have disastrous consequences for Labour's policy of Atlantic solidarity. Mr. Wilson's Vietnam policy is not wrong because it is unpopular, it is wrong because it is wrong.[39]

Venture also highlighted the danger of British policy on Vietnam threatening the Western Alliance.

> If we continue to support the Americans over Vietnam, we shall simply confirm our image in Europe as an American stooge [and this] makes impossible any attempt at an independent foreign policy, and disqualifies us from adopting a more mediatory position in any quarrel in which the United States is involved.[40]

This was a realistic fear. Most obviously, the French, particularly DeGaulle, could use British subservience to the US over Vietnam to justify their rejection of future British applications to join the EEC.

Other extra-Parliamentary unrest on Vietnam included the launch on 19 May of the British Council for Peace in Vietnam (BCPV).[41] Chaired by the Labour Peer, Fenner Brockway, BCPV was conceived as an umbrella organisation and attempted to pull together as many anti-Vietnam groups as possible through its National Campaign Committee. This group aimed for a negotiated settlement of the war and although communist-run, it immediately gained the support of MPs, university

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39 Ibid

40 Ibid

41 *The Times*, 20 May 1965, p. 8

lecturers, teachers, journalists and students, and eventually established support from 29 organizations - political, religious and labour groups.

As elsewhere in the world, students were also beginning to debate and demonstrate on this issue. The first major 'teach-in' in Britain came at the London School of Economics and was followed shortly after by one at Oxford on 17 June 1965, and a national 'teach-in' was held at Westminster on 1 July 1965. The Oxford teach-in was particularly noteworthy, not least because it was televised in full on the BBC and widely reported in the press. Organised by the Oxford Union, its former President, the Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart, agreed at short-notice to speak, as did the former American Ambassador in South Vietnam, Mr. Henry Cabot Lodge. Other speakers during the seven and half hour session included Professor Max Beloff, Christopher Hill, Ralph Miliband of the London School of Economics, Commander Edgar Young, Mr. William Warbey MP, and Eldon Griffiths MP.[42] The political make-up of much of the audience and most of the speakers meant that Stewart and Lodge were in for a rough ride. Stewart gave a speech, penned by the Foreign Office, which was followed by a rigorous question and answer session. The Foreign Secretary's performance confirmed Washington's opinion of him as a loyal ally and staunch public advocate of US action in Vietnam, despite his private questioning of US tactics.

Bruce sent an effusive cable to Rusk describing Stewart's defence of US policy as 'brilliant'. According to the Ambassador the Foreign Secretary,

> was thoroughly at home and prepared for [the] rigged and biased audience with which he had to deal. During [an]

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42 *The Times*, 15 June 1965, p. 12

acrimonious question period he fielded [a] series of loaded and tendencious questions superbly countering hostile allegations with cool, factual replies shot out without hesitation and avoiding pitfalls with masterly skill. Throughout he gave the impression of having thought out his positions after careful study of the facts and arguments of his opponents. His opening speech was outstanding for its lucidity, moderation, fair-mindedness, command of fact, conciseness, logical structure and exactitude of phrase.

Ironically, Bruce was so impressed with Stewart's arguments he sent the full text of the speech to the State Department in the belief that it 'may find its argumentation useful'.[43] Later the same day, Rusk sent a message of appreciation to Stewart congratulating him on his 'brilliant exposition of our mutual interests in South East Asia'.[44]

The speech was indeed pro-American. When asked at the teach-in how far the British Government would go in support of the US policy of escalation, Stewart replied with what was in fact an exposition of Britain's newly formed policy in Vietnam:

> We have thought it right to say that we thought the American Government were justified in what they have so far done in Vietnam (uproar) but that the British Government reserves completely its right to form and express its own opinions on any future events.[45]

The Foreign Secretary's cool performance in the face of constant interruptions, contrasted with Ambassador Lodge's. Bruce told Rusk that of the 900 packed into the Oxford Union Hall, according to Lodge, 80-90 per cent were hostile to US Vietnam policy and many were communist sympathisers.[46] As *The Times* noted,

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[43] Telegram, Bruce to Rusk, 17 June 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. IV, Cables, 5/65-6/65, LBJL

[44] Ibid

[45] British Information Services, 18 June 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. IV, Memos, 5/65-6/65, LBJL

[46] Telegram, Bruce to Rusk, 17 June 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 207, File: UK, Vol. IV, Cables, 5/65-6/65, LBJL

Lodge 'was given a much rougher ride of moans, groans and hisses, having misjudged the nature of his audience completely with talk of lavish American aid and references to Sir Winston Churchill'. When Lodge was faced with such vehement opposition, he eventually asked the Chairman of the teach-in, Christopher Hill, to 'keep order.'[47] On this occasion, the British were more self-assured and confident in explaining what was happening in Vietnam than the Americans.

As indicated by the growing labour and student protest against the war, the Wilson government was also facing a growing public interest in Vietnam. On the 30 June, Philip Noel-Baker MP presented a petition of 100,000 UK citizens to Parliament who were 'gravely disturbed by the mounting cruelty and destruction of the war in Vietnam' and 'therefore pray that Her Majesty's Government may act as a mediator for peace'.[48] Public opinion polls were also registering concern about US action in Vietnam, and British support of it. In April, for the first time the polls indicated that a majority of the British public disapproved of American armed action in Vietnam.[49] By May, 71 per cent believed Britain's role in the conflict was to try to get peace talks started.[50] With his own party, the trade unions, British youth, the general public, and much of the media beginning to ask questions about British policy on Vietnam, Wilson was right to be alarmed about domestic opinion on Vietnam, especially given the tenuous nature of his hold on power.

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47 *The Times*, 17 June 1965, p. 12

48 Hansard, Petitions, 30 June 1965, Vol. 715, Col. 593/594

49 41% disapproved, 31 approved, 28% undecided. Gallup Opinion Poll.

50 Not surprisingly, therefore, July's Gallup Poll showed a 65 per cent approval rating for the Prime Minister's peace proposals. Gallup Opinion Poll.

On 3 June McGeorge Bundy sent a rather blunt memorandum to the President on the subject of 'the British and Vietnam'. It indicated not only Johnson's feelings on the issue but also showed that his advisers felt he was over sensitive about it.

> On a number of occasions you have showed your skepticism when one or another of us has remarked that the British have been very solid and helpful on Vietnam. And of course you have recollections, which the rest of us only have at second hand ... Moreover, you feel the wounds of what Home said about busses and what Michael Stewart said about gas, although everyone else has long since forgotten about those particular episodes.[51]

Bundy felt the President should make an effort with the British, explaining the value of Labour support.

> The support of the UK has been of real value internationally--and perhaps of even more value in limiting the howls of our own liberals. It is quite true, of course, that we would get this kind of backing more or less automatically from a Conservative government, but support from Labour is not only harder to get but somewhat more valuable in international terms.[52]

Indeed, Bruce informed Rusk a month later that in his opinion British support on Vietnam was stronger under Labour than it would be under a Conservative government. He quoted Mr. Godber, Minister of Labour in the last Conservative Government who believed, 'responsibilities of office have obliged Labor leaders to approach [the] question more realistically and in [a] more statesmanlike manner than they would in opposition' and if the Conservatives were in power 'their support for US policy would still be strong but if as he anticipated Labour in opposition followed

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[51] Memo for the President from McGeorge Bundy, 3 June 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Vol. V, Memos 6//65, Box 208, LBJL

[52] Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 16 July 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 208, File: UK, Vol. III, Cables, 7/65-9/65, LBJL

[a] policy closer to that advocated by its left wing' then the result might compel the Tories to adopt a 'less forthcoming British Government position'. Bruce agreed that 'a Conservative Government under fire from Labor opposition might find it more difficult to muster popular support for US policy on this issue.'[53]

Bundy also felt it was necessary to defend Wilson personally:

> It remains a fact that every experienced observer from David Bruce on down has been astonished by the overall strength and skill of Wilson's defense of our policy in Vietnam and his mastery of his own left wing in the process.[54]

Bundy concluded that:

> the only price we have paid for this support is the price of keeping them reasonably well informed and fending off one ill-advised plan for travel. This is not a very great cost. Moreover, we have had no leaks from the British, and no public expression of worry about the length of the pause.... I see no advantage at all in putting them at arms length and thus increasing the risk that they will be tempted to criticize. You have taught us all a great deal about the advantages of Congressional consultation in the last year and a half - I myself believe the same rules apply in diplomatic consultation. After all, we are dealing with human beings in both cases.[55]

This memo provided clear evidence of the President's lack of faith in the British on Vietnam and of his growing impatience with the British need to be seen to be close to him on this. It may also go some way to explaining Johnson's slightly more tolerant position toward Wilson during the second half of the year.

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53 Ibid

54 Memo for the President from McGeorge Bundy, 3 June 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Vol. V, Memos 6/65, Box 208, LBJL

55 Ibid

The Commonwealth Peace Mission

Wilson's next peace gambit, or gimmick as his critics called it, was the larger and grander Commonwealth Peace Mission. The Prime Minister was scheduled to chair the week-long Commonwealth Prime Ministers' conference being held in London beginning on 17 June and he sensed the opportunity to play world statesman.

According to Wilson, after breakfast at Chequers on Monday 14 June and while pacing the terrace in the sun, he came up with idea of a three-man Commonwealth Mission. The benefits of such an endeavour were obvious. The Commonwealth conference represented a sixth of the total UN membership of 117 countries, and almost a quarter of the world's population. At that time there were 21 Commonwealth nations.[56] Another strength was that

> every political philosophy was represented there, including a majority of non-aligned nations. On the Vietnam issue there were pro-Americans, anti-Americans and the totally uncommitted: a microcosm of the UN and of the world itself. A peace mission sponsored by so widely representative a conference should therefore be accepted - as an individual nation's initiative from any quarter could not be.

After discussing it with Derek Mitchell, his Principal Private Secretary and Oliver Wright, his Foreign Office Private Secretary, the proposal was ironed out and explained to the Foreign Secretary the same lunchtime. Wilson would

> put to the conference at its opening session a proposal to set up,

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[56] The following leaders represented their countries at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference: Harold Wilson (Great Britain); Mr. Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri (India); President Ayub Khan (Pakistan); Tunku Abdul Rahman (Malaysia); Mr. F. Wijemanne (Ceylon); Sir Robert Menzies (Australia); Mr. Keith Holyoake (New Zealand); Mr. Lester Pearson (Canada); Dr. Eric Williams (Trinidad); Mr. Donald Sangster (Jamaica); President Kaunda (Zambia); Mr. David Jawara (Gambia); President Nkrumah (Ghana); Sir Abubaka Tafawa Balewa (Nigeria); Sir Albert Margal (Sierra Leone); President Nyerere (Tanzania); Dr. Hastings Banda (Malawi); Mr. Joseph Murumbi (Kenya); Dr. Milton Obote (Uganda); Dr. Borg Olivier (Malta); Mr. Spyros Kyprianou (Cyprus).

> with the authority of the whole Commonwealth, a mission of four prime ministers - or five, if this became necessary to secure balance - representing every point of view on the Vietnam issue. No party to the dispute could feel that the mission was in any way rigged in favour of some preconceived solution.[57]

The Mission would visit Washington, Peking, Moscow, Saigon and Hanoi and would also meet with the three members of the International Control Commission (Poland, India and Canada) and would begin its journey during the first part of July. Stewart approved of the idea, as did the Foreign Office, but felt the White House should be consulted 'as a matter of urgency'.[58]

The British also thought it essential to get the Mission endorsed by the Australians. Sir Robert Menzies, Australian Prime Minister, approved of the idea during a dinner with the Prime Minister at the Australian High Commission that evening. At this point, the Australian and British Ambassadors in Washington met with Dean Rusk and William Bundy at the State Department. Patrick Dean showed Rusk a written copy of the proposal and after he had read it pointed out that, 'the British Government did not expect formal approval from the U.S. to go ahead with this initiative but hoped at least to have U.S. acquiescence'. He also explained that:

> the aim of the British and Australian governments was to be helpful to the U.S. It was hoped that by floating this proposal on the first day of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference, the Conference discussion on Vietnam could be turned into constructive channels.

It was also hoped that this initiative would 'take some of the wind out of the sails of the forthcoming Algiers Conference'. This was the Afro-Asian conference planned

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57 Harold Wilson, *Labour Government 1964-1970 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974)*, p. 150

58 Ibid, p. 151

for 24 June to 3 July. This conference of 'third world' nations, included many communists and non-aligned nationals and Britain and America feared it might become 'an anti-Western rally' passing critical resolutions.[59] Premier Chou En Lai of China would be attending along with 12 members of the Commonwealth.[60] Rusk said he would confer with the President before giving Dean the US reaction to the planned Mission.[61]

The Prime Minister also explained the initiative in more detail to Ambassador Bruce later that same night. Bruce enthusiastically described it as 'brilliant', 'a terrific idea', and 'something with great prospects'. Although raising some difficulties with the plan, he agreed that 'if the project could be got off the ground there were bound to be benefits whether it succeeded in its object or not'.[62] The Prime Minister was indeed realistic about the chances of his initiative leading to a Conference on Vietnam. Although 'not over-hopeful' about this, he too stressed that 'it was bound to be a winner whether or not the Mission succeeded'. As the Foreign Office recognised, one way it could be a success was by highlighting the seeming intransigence of the Communist nations:

> Even if the Mission fails ... either through the refusal of Peking or Hanoi to receive it or because these capitals take an utterly negative line, then nonetheless there will be considerable advantage for the Western position in identifying the Governments which are making a Conference impossible. On the worst assumption, namely if Peking and Hanoi refuse to receive the Mission at all, this will be taken as a great snub to Afro-Asian

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59 Telegram from Rusk to Bruce, 16 June 1965, Declassified Documents Series

60 Ceylon, Cyprus, Ghana, Indian, Kenya, Malawai, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Zambia, Uganda

61 Memo of Conversation between Dean Rusk, William Bundy, Patrick Dean, John Keith Waller, 15 June, 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 208, File: UK, Vol. IV, Memos 2 of 2, 7/65-9/65, LBJL

62 Note for the Record: Commonwealth Mission on Vietnam, Derek Mitchell, Midnight 15 June 1965, PREM 13/660, PRO

opinion.[63]

In this way, Wilson hoped to ingratiate himself with the Americans.

Bruce and Derek Mitchell discussed whether there should be any direct contact between the Prime Minister and the President on the Mission. Mitchell said a telephone call initiated by Wilson had been advised against because of the only previous occasion when he had done so, when the experience had been 'thoroughly unsatisfactory'.[64] Instead he thought it would be useful if the President could call the Prime Minister 'confirming whatever reaction was coming back to us through the diplomatic channel'. Later that night Bruce sent a telegram to Washington giving further detail on the Commonwealth initiative and urging the President to call the Prime Minister, or at least to send a pleasant personal message to him. The following afternoon Bruce followed this up by telephoning McGeorge Bundy who informed him that 'the President had no liking for hot line conversations, but he might be persuaded to send Wilson a telegram'.[65] The attempt to convince the President that the British were worth the effort continued. Johnson did not ring Wilson but did send a cable outlining 'the President's own thinking about Vietnam at this stage'.[66] The President was apparently 'keenly interested in the Prime Minister's imaginative proposal' and welcomed 'the readiness of the Prime Ministers to make another try' at ending the intransigence in Hanoi and Peking. He also said that he fully agreed with the view that 'even if the mission fails in its immediate purpose, it should succeed in showing just where the responsibility lies'.[67]

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63 Telegram, Immediate to All Post from Foreign Office, 16 June 1965, FO371/180566, PRO

64 D.J. Mitchell, Note for the Record, Commonwealth Mission on Vietnam, PREM 13/660, PRO

65 David Bruce diaries, 16 June 1965

66 Telegram from Bundy to Bruce, 16 June 1965 in FRUS 1964-68, Volume III, p. 11

67 Ibid, p. 12

Whether drafted by LBJ or an advisor, this cable reflected the sentiment in Washington regarding the Mission. Dean informed 10 Downing Street that the Prime Minister's initiative had been 'very well received in Washington' and 'so far from presenting any real problems has been positively received'.[68] That evening Bruce met Wilson again to convey Washington's 'warm approval' of the initiative and their relatively minor reservation on the route the Mission might follow. The Americans preferred it that the first and last visits should not be to Washington.

At the Cabinet meeting on Tuesday 15 June Wilson used his plan to relieve the mounting pressure from his government colleagues to take action on Vietnam. Barbara Castle admits she went along 'determined to have a showdown about Vietnam' but was forestalled by the Prime Minister when he opened the meeting with,

> a reference to mysterious negotiations of which he had high hopes. He and the Foreign Secretary were in the middle of a very delicate operation and he asked us not to press for more details at this stage. I merely contented myself with asking whether Vietnam would be discussed at the Commonwealth PMS' conference. After trying to hedge for a moment, he replied, "Undoubtedly."[69]

So before the Commonwealth conference had even started, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Office had already finalised a great deal of their plans for the proposed Mission. It was decided a three-man Mission would be best, the Prime Minister would chair it and the other two members would be chosen by the Conference, one from an Asian nation, the other an African. The Mission would report back to the Commonwealth Prime Ministers collectively and also to the

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68 Patrick Dean, Washington to Foreign Office, No. 1563, 16 June 1965, PREM 13/695, PRO

69 Barbara Castle diaries, 15 June 1965, p. 20

interested governments and to the world at large. The Governments concerned would be asked immediately if they would receive the Mission. Only at this point would the United States publicly respond to the initiative.[70]

Wilson was now faced with the task of getting the other 20 Commonwealth nations to agree to his plans. As the presidents and prime ministers arrived in London, Wilson saw them one by one either at 10 Downing Street or at their hotels, to broach the subject. He could not be too specific about the details of the plan because of the danger of leaks. His idea was, however, initially welcomed by Lester Pearson of Canada, President Ayub Khan of Pakistan, President Kaunda of Zambia, and, it appeared, President Nyerere of Tanzania who according to Wilson was 'prepared to accept it, without question, though equally without enthusiasm.'[71]

On the morning the Conference began the British informed Bundy at the White House that the Prime Minister would 'now go into battle … with good hopes of bringing off this coup'.[72] His high hopes for the Conference were also revealed to Barbara Castle the same morning.

> Harold, coming in to answer his PQS, slipped in next to me on the bench. He was as excited as a schoolboy: said he had worked out his peace initiative on Vietnam, sounded out a number of Commonwealth PMS and was just off to put it to them. If all went well, he hoped to be able to interrupt parliamentary business at about 6 pm to make his statement. It was 'very big'.[73]

The official opening of the conference took place at Marlborough House on the morning of Thursday, 17 June. The first working session began at 3.30 pm when

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70 Telegram from Foreign Office to All Posts, 16 June 1965, 'Vietnam', FO371/180566, PRO

71 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 151/152

72 Message to McGeorge Bundy delivered 11.15 am, 17 June 1965, PREM 13/695, PRO

73 *Barbara Castle diaries*, 17 June 1965

Wilson persuaded the conferees to meet in restricted session in the Chairman's room.[74] Wilson put the proposition to the members and it appears to have been 'warmly endorsed' by most of them. However, despite his earlier apparent willingness to go along with the initiative, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania was now not happy with it. According to Wilson, Nyerere 'felt that for us to put forward even the neutral posture of an independent mission would appear to condone "American aggression"' and 'was also deeply concerned about the reaction the proposal might have in China.' And,

> the longer the argument continued and the greater the number of Commonwealth countries who supported me, the sharper became his objections .... As the evening wore on he made very clear, what I had feared all along, that while he was quite willing to attend a Commonwealth conference and play an active part in it, he was concerned also to take no action which would prejudice the success of the conference which was immediately to follow ours, the second Afro-Asian 'Third World' conference, in Algiers.[75]

Despite Nyerere's objections, Wilson was adamant that a decision be made that night. So by 8.30 pm the conference had agreed to issue a communiqué announcing the Mission. Tanzania still objected but did so covertly due to the 'long-established convention of unanimity at Commonwealth conferences.'[76] The only changes to Wilson's original plan were in the Mission's format. According to Bruce after 'a tremendous row amongst the Prime Ministers ... Wilson had to shift ground'.[77] The conference decided to appoint five heads of government and none of

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74 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 152
75 Ibid
76 Ibid, p. 153
77 Bruce diaries, 17 June 1965

them were from Asian countries. Instead, after much discussion the leaders of Britain, Nigeria, Ghana, Ceylon and Trinidad were chosen.[78]

The Prime Minister emerged from the talks to give a television interview. Together with Bob Menzies, he outlined briefly what had just taken place. After that, around midnight, when there was a break in Parliamentary business, Wilson announced the initiative to the House where it was generally well-received. The Press used words such as 'original', 'bold and imaginative' to describe it.[79] Immediate reaction was not all favourable, however. Castle 'was disappointed by the nature of Harold's "very big" achievement' because 'there was no statement of principles to suggest the basis of a solution'. It struck her, amongst others, as 'a gesture rather than conviction'.[80]

Wilson's portrayal of Commonwealth unity on the initiative was soon shattered. Later that evening at Wilson's Commonwealth reception at No. 10 for Foreign Ministers, it emerged that Murumbi of Kenya was also upset by the initiative. According to Castle he was

> very disgruntled by Harold's initiative, said he had rushed the conference too much. Anyway, it was quite wrong that Harold should be chairman of the mission: he was too committed to the American line. 'We expected better things of a Labour Government.'[81]

Although the next day's press gave Wilson's plan a 'glowing reception' as Barbara Castle put it, the Prime Minister still had to deal with the 'rumbles of discontent'

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78 The following day the Prime Minister of Ceylon dropped out on health grounds.
79 See Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 154
80 *Barbara Castle diaries*, 17 June 1965
81 Ibid

among some of the Commonwealth delegates.[82] Wilson's handling of the previous day's events was one problem. Apparently when Nyerere had asked Wilson how he could record his disagreement, the Prime Minister had said 'You can't'. The next day Nyerere 'came out categorically against it as putting China in the dock'.[83] He argued during a BBC interview that:

> The Commonwealth as a group should not appear to be backing up Mr. Wilson or the United States on Vietnam. We must not appear to be aligned in any action we take. Already an attempt has been made by the British Government [the Gordon Walker mission] and the other side has said 'No.' What is it we are suggesting which will appear to the other side to be a new initiative!

Mr. Murumbi also publicly declared his problems with the Mission. He said that while Kenya supported the initiative, 'it is opposed to Britain or any other country which has committed itself on the issue being a member of the proposed mission'.[84] Another problem was the insistence by some of the Commonwealth representatives that the Mission see the Viet Cong. This was 'especially distracting' but was solved 'by agreement that if the Viet Cong turn up in Hanoi as part of the North Vietnamese governmental apparatus, they can express opinions'.[85] In private, the British had already reassured Washington that the Viet Cong would only be seen in Hanoi.

> Despite some disagreement, the Prime Ministers of the British Commonwealth went ahead and issued a joint message on Friday 18 June to the UN Secretary General and to the Heads of Government of the USA, USSR, the Chinese People's Republic, the Republic of Viet-Nam (South Viet-Nam) and the Democratic

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82 Ibid, 18 June 1965

83 Ibid and Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 154

84 Keesing's Contemporary Archives, 10-17 July 1965, p. 20841

85 Bruce diaries, 19 June 1965

Republic of Viet-Nam (North Viet-Nam). It expressed 'deep concern at the increasingly serious situation developing in Viet-Nam' and suggested that a Mission 'make contact with the Governments principally concerned with the problem of Viet-Nam in order to seek their views as to the circumstances in which a Conference on Viet-Nam might be held'.[86] They were also asked whether they could be prepared to receive the four leaders representing the Commonwealth some time in July. The same day David Bruce recognised that 'the Prime Minister's imaginative conception of a Commonwealth mission' was 'in disorder' and felt it necessary to telephone George Ball in Washington to 'caution him against anyone in our Government making premature plans in connection with what may finally eventuate here'.[87]

In order to counteract the now numerous diversionary press briefings by disgruntled members of the Conference, Wilson came up with the idea of the Mission announcing a ceasefire 'in order to maintain the momentum of the Mission'.[88] Although Washington was willing to receive the Mission, it had already informed Wilson that it was reluctant to institute a pause during the duration of the Mission's tour. So when by Saturday 19 June, the Mission members had proceeded to preparatory work for the tour and issued a statement clarifying the situation, although Wilson would have liked it, the US insisted no mention be made of a ceasefire during the duration of the Mission. Still, the statement appealed 'to all parties concerned to show the utmost restraint in military operations as a step towards the total cease-fire which the mission hopes will be established at the earliest possible opportunity'.[89]

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86 Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, Draft Message, FO371/180567, PRO

87 Bruce diaries, 18 June 1965

88 Record of Events, Commonwealth Peace Mission, 14-20 June 1965, PREM 13/660, PRO

89 *The Times*, 21 June 1965, p. 8

Very soon negative responses to the proposed mission emerged from Hanoi and Peking. Chou En-lai, Chinese Prime Minister denounced the initiative on 19 June as 'a manoeuvre in support of the U.S. "peace talks" hoax' and predicted its 'ignominious failure'. On 21 June an article in the Chinese *People's Daily* described Wilson as a 'nitwit' and said the Mission was a 'continuation of the British Labour Government's constant efforts to serve as an errand boy for the United States.' Hanoi's leading newspaper, *Nhan Dan*, described the peace initiative as a 'vicious scheme.'[90] Nevertheless, Wilson retained a measure of optimism, feeling that the Soviets were the key to the whole operation, and that the North Vietnamese and the Chinese might change their minds. However, on 23 June the Soviets refused to receive the mission, followed by the Chinese two days later.

The Americans cabled the Prime Minister regarding press reports indicating the Mission might still go to Washington.[91] On 24 June Bruce noted:

> If it should turn out that visit will only be made to U Thant, President Johnson, and the Government in Saigon, our officials are apprehensive of a call at Washington, thinking the Afro-Asian representatives could make remarks so hostile to our own policy that it would accentuate seriously our public opinion and Congressional problems. We were therefore instructed to make clear to the PM and Foreign Minister our belief that a mission of this kind would make no contribution to a peaceful settlement, but would only seriously impair the US position and cause great ill will at home.

By 27 June, Washington and Saigon had officially accepted the invitation to give their views to the Mission, although not necessarily agreeing to receive it.

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[90] *The Times*, 22 June 1965, p. 9 and *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, 10-17 July 10-17 1965, p. 20841

[91] Hand delivered to PM by Phil Kaiser. Rusk to Bruce,. 23 June 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, File: UK, Vol. V, Cables, 6/65, Box 207, LBJL

By the end of the Conference a set of 'instructions for the mission' had been established.

(i) a suspension of all United States air attacks on North Vietnam;
(ii) a North Vietnamese undertaking to prevent the movement of military forces or assistance or material to South Vietnam;
(iii) a total cease-fire on all sides to enable a conference to be convened to seek a peaceful settlement;
(iv) the objectives of such a conference might be to:
  (a) end the war in Vietnam;
  (b) secure the withdrawal of all foreign military presence from Vietnam and the neutralization of the area;
  (c) establish, for a period, an international peace force, under the auspices of the Geneva Agreement. to safeguard peace in Vietnam;
  (d) establish principles for the eventual unification of the country through free and internationally supervised elections.

Wilson wrote later that getting this set of guidelines through a conference of twenty-one states was 'no mean achievement'.[92] However, The Americans were troubled by these guidelines as they appeared to suggest that in return for ending the bombing, the Americans would accept an 'assurance' from the communist countries to cease their activities. Rusk was also annoyed that they appeared to suggest a ceasefire would be a precondition for talks, something the Americans had no intention of agreeing to at that stage.[93]

Wilson's Reasons for the Mission

Ultimately the Commonwealth Peace Mission failed. The tour did not get off the ground. It was, however, Wilson's most ambitious and most serious attempt to

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92 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 162

93 Memorandum of Conversation between Patrick Gordon Walker and Dean Rusk, Department of State, Washington, 29 June 1965, Vietnam, NSF, Country File, Europe & USSR, UK, Box 208, File: UK, Vol. VI, Memos. 2 of 2, 7/65-9/65, Doc. 258a, LBJL

establish peace talks. For that reason there has been much speculation as to his motives in proposing it. Wilson justified it largely on humanitarian and strategic grounds: it was a genuine attempt to end a costly and risky war. While this may have been Wilson's ultimate objective, he acknowledged the Mission was highly unlikely to succeed. The Mission could, however, help him deal with more immediate problems. Firstly, such a high profile initiative would greatly ease his domestic political problems. Indeed, Richard Crossman, Minister of Housing and Local Government, immediately labelled it a 'stunt' feeling it was 'designed to calm the left-wing of the Party'.[94]

A possible second reason why Wilson pressed so hard for the Peace Mission on the first day of the Conference lay in the increasing tensions within the Commonwealth over Rhodesia. Crossman began to suspect this when the Conference had finished and he managed to discuss the initiative with Wilson while walking through the corridors of the Houses of Parliament. Crossman expressed his anxiety that the Prime Minister would have been away for about a month had the Mission gone ahead. Wilson replied that it would only have been a fortnight but added, 'Anyway, I think we have got most of the value we can out of it already.' Crossman interpreted these words as meaning Wilson had managed to prevent a break-up of the Conference on the first day over Rhodesia.

> Black Africa is now virtually at war with Rhodesia whereas the white Commonwealth is still trying to keep the peace. In order to postpone that row and create a better atmosphere, Harold needed a personal initiative on the first day and in this sense I have no doubt that the stunt was brilliantly successful.[95]

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94 *Richard Crossman diaries*, 17 June 1965, p. 115 and 18 June, p. 116

95 Ibid, 27 June 1965, p. 117

Wilson did indeed manage to get the Conference to focus constructively on Vietnam, and avoided a major discussion on Rhodesia. The Conference's final communiqué merely talked about the possibility of summoning a 'constitutional conference' on white Rhodesia in due course.

Crossman rightly concluded that the Prime Minister,

> had pulled off a diplomatic coup which was popular with public opinion, eased the situation in his own Party and prevented a potential breakdown of the Commonwealth Conference. One can't be surprised if he is rather pleased with himself.[96]

It is certainly illuminating to see how the Mission proposal was received. The Fabian Society's journal, *Venture*, were effusive in its praise of Wilson and the Commonwealth Mission on Vietnam, saying it:

> may fail in its objectives, but in its initiation some useful modifications of attitude have been produced. Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Malaysia have participated in a demand for the cessation of US bombing raids. Two nations whose friendship China does not wish to lose, Tanzania and Pakistan, have joined the demand to North Vietnam to stop the transit of military men and goods to the South. Three Western governments closely identified with US policy in Vietnam have joined in saying that their mission must meet the Vietcong, thus giving public, if not quite 'diplomatic', recognition - in defiance of the US ... These modifications of attitude are useful in themselves and mark a breaking down of the rigid positions. The Commonwealth mission, whatever it achieves in Vietnam, has stimulated some fresh thought elsewhere.... If one of Mr. Wilson's objects in calling the Commonwealth conference was to help rally the British Labour movement behind him, we can only report that with us he has succeeded.[97]

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96 Ibid

97 *Venture*, July-August 1965, Editorial, p. 3-4

In the short-term the Commonwealth Peace Mission had other positive political consequences. It was recognised that through the initiative Wilson had regained a measure of independence from the US on Vietnam. Bruce noted that Wilson 'approved generally of our policy in Vietnam, believing we are trapped, but reserves the right to criticize - as witness his calls for a cessation of bombings'.[98] Tony Benn also interpreted Wilson's efforts in this way:

> The Commonwealth Conference has allowed him to put on a Commonwealth hat in the place of the NATO hat which the Foreign Office is always trying to screw on to him. He has disengaged himself from his previous commitment on Vietnam with enormous skill ….The Commonwealth Prime Ministers' conference has made a big difference but I don't think it's permeated through to ordinary people on the Left yet that it has permitted Harold to disengage himself from a close alignment with the American position.[99]

Unfortunately for Wilson, although the Commonwealth Peace Mission did temporarily quieten dissent on the Labour backbench, it was soon seen by many as yet another of Wilson's gimmicks. It is doubtful, however, that Wilson viewed his initiatives in this way. Some of Wilson's key advisers suggest that Wilson's peace initiatives were not intended as peace gimmicks but that he managed to turn them into such by his behaviour.[100] Whereas previous Prime Ministers had been praised for their peace gambits - Macmillan flying to Moscow during World War II, Eden at Geneva in 1954 - Wilson's manner and reputation prevented him from receiving much credit for his efforts. When he announced this particular initiative to the House of Commons Wilson had been aware that he should not arouse expectations

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98 Bruce diaries, 26 June 1965

99 *Benn Diaries*, 28 June 1965, p. 281 and 30 June 1965, p. 283

100 Off-the-record interviews with author

unduly and therefore was careful to stress that the chances of success were not great. However, in a sense Wilson had already over-sold the initiative before it became public, inflating his proposal by describing it to colleagues as 'big'. In addition his television announcement of the plan appeared too flamboyant. Crossman described it in the following terms:

> I ... was just settling down to Michael Stewart's teach-in on Vietnam at Oxford when it was interrupted for a news bulletin. There was the Prime Minister announcing the Commonwealth mission to Vietnam and Bob Menzies clapping him on the back and saying, 'I give this trip to you, old boy. Really it was your idea.' The political matiness and gimmickry of the proceedings were in startling contrast with Stewart's performance which preceded and followed it (he was a brilliant television success and put the American case more competently than any American has ever put it).[101]

Wilson's apparent concern with his own personal prestige, his playing of the role of the 'honest broker' troubled many. For instance, if he really wanted the Commonwealth Peace Mission to succeed, he need not have insisted on leading the initiative himself. The fact that he did, led the Communist powers to suspect, correctly, that he was not working entirely independently of the United States.

The Harold Davies Mission

Wilson's reputation for gimmicks grew even further when he sent Harold Davies MP to Hanoi. Even Wilson's loyal Chief Whip, Edward Short, thought it 'his most colourful move so far'.[102]

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101 *Richard Crossman diaries*, 17 June 1965, p. 116

102 Edward Short, *Whip to Wilson*, p. 160

Although the signs coming out of Moscow and Hanoi were not good, the nature of the replies from the Soviets and the North Vietnamese left Wilson with some hopes for the Commonwealth Mission. He informed the Cabinet on 1 July that the Soviets 'had evaded a direct response by suggesting that the effective decision lay with the Government of North Vietnam; and the latter, who were clearly subject to conflicting pressures from the Chinese and Soviet Government, had so far maintained an ambiguous attitude'.[103] Wilson was alluding to the lack of an official refusal from Hanoi to receive the Mission and by 6 July the Prime Minister was informing President Johnson that 'nearly two weeks have passed without the North Vietnamese imitating the Chinese example of final and formal rejection. Hanoi is obviously receiving conflicting advice from Moscow and Peking and is temporising accordingly. This leaves the door slightly ajar...'.[104] Wilson was determined to use this gap to further pursue the idea of the Mission.

Joint Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance and close friend of the Prime Minister, Harold Davies had been a regular visitor to Hanoi, had met some of its leaders, and had written extensively on Ho Chi Minh. He was considered someone who might be able to establish a link to Hanoi in secret. At Wilson's prompting, Davies contacted North Vietnamese journalists in London who 'constituted an official North Vietnamese presence', to see if it might be worth him visiting Hanoi again. An affirmative answer came back and Davies was told a visa would await him in Phnom Penh. Donald Murray, a specialist on Vietnam at the Foreign Office, was to accompany him. The Americans were apparently happy for Davies to try to make contact with the North Vietnamese but he

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103 Cabinet Meeting, 1 July 1965, CAB128/39 Pt. 2, PRO

104 Prime Minister to President, Confidential, 6 July 1965, PREM 13/1196, PRO

had no authority to speak for them. Sir Paul Gore-Booth found that Bruce 'seemed to be quite relaxed about this initiative, though not surprised by the difficulties and not optimistic about the upshot'.[105]

As Wilson put it, 'unfortunately, whatever hopes the Davies visit might have justified were dashed by a serious, indeed disastrous, leak in London, while he was on the way'.[106] It was rumoured that the leak had come out of the Foreign Office. Whether true or not, British diplomats were extremely dismissive of this particular initiative. Gore-Booth later admitted that 'one could advise, with all the respect due to Mr Harold Davies' personal qualities and knowledge of the area, that his mission also could only be a failure. There seemed at the moment nothing that we could do'.[107] Another Foreign Office adviser thought it was, 'an absolutely ludicrous mission to Vietnam but it gave him [Wilson] a respite for about three weeks'.[108]

Davies visited Hanoi between 8 and 13 July.[109] Possibly due to the leak, Davies was not allowed to meet Ho Chi Minh or Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, instead being allowed about 7 hours with the Secretariat of the Viet Nam Fatherland Front Central Committee. Murray was not even allowed in the country.

Davies' brief was straightforward. He should tell the North Vietnamese leaders that even if they believed their struggle was just and that they could achieve a military victory, they should 'explore the possibility of negotiations' in order to save thousands of lives and prevent the risk of the war spreading.[110] Davies found, however, that Hanoi exuded great confidence in their conviction of imminent victory

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105 Foreign Office Minute by Sir Paul Gore-Booth, Talk with US Ambassador 9 July, 12 July 1965, FO371/179573, PRO

106 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 167

107 Paul Gore-Booth, *With Great Truth and Respect* (London: Constable, 1974), p. 336/7

108 Interview with author, 27 April 1993

109 Cabinet Meeting, 8 July 1965, CAB128/39 Pt. 2, PRO

110 Foreign Office Memo, 'Talking Points for Use in Hanoi', 5 July 1965, PREM 13/696, PRO

and showed no signs of responding to the Commonwealth mission.[111] Still, he returned to London arguing his trip had been worthwhile because, he believed his portrayal of British views on Vietnam would be 'gone through and ... not be ignored by the North Vietnamese leaders'.[112] He contended that his defence of the British position and the Commonwealth Mission created intensive discussions and that 'this was the first time that any detailed argument from the West had been heard in Hanoi.'[113] Wilson admitted there had been no progress as a result of the Davies Mission but thought 'it might have done something to shift the ice-pack'.[114] This was wishful thinking. The Davies Mission did, however, succeed in keeping the Labour backbenchers under control. During a two-day foreign affairs debate on July 19 and 20, that Wilson opened with a firm explanation of British support for the US in Vietnam, the atmosphere in the Commons remained muted. According to Bruce, the Prime Minister 'evidently feels that if Davies trip had limited international results, it had been very helpful domestically in calming his own backbenchers'.[115]

Further British Initiatives

The British Foreign Office decided it was now time to reassess Britain's position on Vietnam and negotiations. Never altogether happy with Wilson's initiatives, by the summer of 1965 an obvious tension had developed between the Prime Minister and much of the Foreign Office.

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[111] Memorandum from W. Bundy, Negotiating and International Actions Concerning Vietnam, 24 July 1965, Declassified Documents Series.

[112] Harold Davies Report to the Prime Minister of Visit to Hanoi from 8-13 July 1965, PREM 13/696, PRO

[113] Ibid

[114] Record of a Meeting in the Prime Minister's Room at the House of Commons 15 July 1965 between the Prime Minister and Dr. Eric Williams Prime Minister of Trinidad, PREM 13/696, PRO

[115] Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 19 July 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 208, File: UK, Vol. III, Cables, 7/65-9/65, LBJL

On 12 July, James Cable, Head of the South East Asia Department at the Foreign Office argued in a key memorandum that:

> British efforts to promote negotiation have relied on the argument that a compromise settlement would be preferable to the risk of escalation entailed by the pursuit of outright victory by either side. This argument commands widespread sympathy at home and, among those not directly involved, abroad. But we should not suppose that it is yet accepted by the actual contestants.

Cable then outlined the current thinking in Washington, Saigon, Moscow and Peking and Hanoi. The latter two capitals believed that British peace initiatives had had been undertaken at the instigation of the US Government. Therefore, 'each fresh initiative on our part will have reinforced ... the conviction that the Americans are desperate and are trying to save by negotiation what they now realise will be lost if the fighting continues'.[116] According to Cable, all involved parties interpreted what happened at Geneva in 1954 differently, which meant a return to the Geneva conference was fraught with problems. He concluded, therefore, that,

> in these circumstances it is most unlikely that further efforts on our part will induce the Communists to change their minds and offer acceptable terms for negotiation. On the contrary, further British initiatives will probably do more harm than good, by reinforcing the Communist conviction that the Americans are on the run, and will capitulate completely if pressed sufficiently hard.[117]

Cable was not optimistic about the prospects of the US achieving much military success in Vietnam and argued that the British now had two alternatives, 'to remain

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116 J.E. Cable, Foreign Office Minute, 'Viet-Nam and Negotiations', 12 July 1965, FO371/180587, PRO
117 Ibid

passive and hope that intensified American military activity will induce the Communists to negotiate' or 'to persuade the U.S. Government to negotiate on terms acceptable to the Communists'. Believing the first option 'would involve unacceptable risk' and the second one presented a real danger to Anglo-American relations that would involve the US abandoning its South Vietnamese allies, and thereby risking America's credibility as an ally, Cable came up with his own alternative solution to the problem. He wondered if it would be possible for the Americans to withdraw from Vietnam on the proviso that the South Vietnamese leadership be offered 'a fresh start outside South Viet-Nam'. He went into more detail:

> Supposing, for instance, that there are as many as a million irreconcilable anti-Communists in South Viet-Nam, could the U.S. Government undertake to evacuate them all and establish them on some Pacific Island? Formosa would obviously be unsuitable, but there are plenty of under-populated islands in the Philippines and there may well be possibilities in the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides or in other island colonies of the South Pacific.[118]

This notion of 'towing the "loyal" Vietnamese out into the Pacific' received short shrift from Cable's superiors, not least because it was impractical.[119] The problem was beginning to look insoluble to some within the Foreign Office.

E.H. Peck, Head of the Far Eastern Department, agreed with Cable's ultimate suggestion that Britain 'should abstain from further public initiatives' believing the Government had 'done enough to demonstrate our good will and to do more would be detrimental to our own prestige and future influence as well as, in all probability,

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118 Ibid

119 Handwritten minute. E.H. Peck, 24 August 1965, 'Future of South Vietnam', FO371/180588, PRO

actually to impair the chance of negotiations'. Instead a public campaign against Communist intransigence should be mounted, coupled with a private warning to the Communists that 'the Americans mean business'.[120]

Lord Walston, Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, took a harder and more optimistic line than Cable. On 2 August he wrote to Stewart arguing that the only way Hanoi would come to the negotiating table was when it was convinced it couldn't win the war. To this end, Walston felt that 'the immediate job of the West ... is to convince them of this fact'. He recognised that 'the most obvious way of doing this is to step up the bombardment, even to the extent of, for instance, bombing the dykes and flooding much of the North's fertile rice-land before the crop can be harvested'. However, Walston not only doubted the effectiveness of bombing - it could strengthen the will to resist rather than weaken it - but also recognised that due to the unpopularity of bombing, this action would make Britain's job of 'holding the line' very much harder. Intensification of America's military effort through ground operations would have 'none of these drawbacks' and he argued, therefore, and Michael Stewart agreed with him, that

> the most useful thing that we can do at the present time vis-a-vis the Americans is to try to convince them of these facts. They will find it unpalatable because their instinct is to look for quick results by massive air superiority; and also because plodding jungle warfare is not the trade to which their soldiers have been trained. Nevertheless I believe we should try whenever the opportunity presents itself.[121]

At the end of August Cable wrote another discursive memorandum entitled 'the possibility of a negotiated solution of the conflict in Viet-Nam'. This memo

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120 J.E. Cable, Foreign Office Minutes, 'Viet-Nam Negotiations', 12 July 1965, FO371/180587, PRO

121 Walston to Michael Stewart, 2 August 1965 (with handwritten note by Michael Stewart), FO371/180587/DV1075/167, PRO

considered what was 'practicable' rather than 'desirable'. He admitted that this was crystal-ball gazing because Britain remained 'distinctly uncertain about the real intentions in this matter of the U.S. Government'.[122] Nevertheless, Cable outlined the various negotiation scenarios dependent on either US military success, defeat or stalemate. Either way, he did not expect the US to succeed in permanently eradicating or reducing long-term, the communist threat. He therefore wondered whether

> it would be ... worthwhile to give the Americans a suitably bowdlerised version of this memorandum. Hitherto we have rather tended to regard Viet-Nam as too delicate and embarrassing a subject for frank or far-reaching Anglo-American discussion, but I wonder whether it might not be in the interests of both Government to break this tradition and exchange views with holds barred. There might be some hurt feelings, but, once these had subsided, we should have a much better idea of American intentions and future Anglo-American cooperation might be facilitated.[123]

Cable's suggestion came at a time when the US 'appeared' to be increasing its chances of military success. Etherington-Smith, British Ambassador in Saigon, was so optimistic about this that he felt that there might not even be a negotiation in the end. Peck too thought Cable too pessimistic agreeing with Etherington-Smith that 'it is true that US might is now beginning to bite on the Viet Cong and that we could see a US negotiation from strength'. Not surprisingly, therefore, Peck felt Cable's paper might go to Dean in Washington 'inviting his comments on the desirability of discussing it with the State Department but without doing so at this stage.'[124] Cable

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[122] Letter from J.E. Cable to N.C.C. Trench, 6 September 1965, FO371/180588/DV19075/187, PRO

[123] Minute by J.E. Cable, 26 August 1965, FO 371/180588, PRO

[124] Minute by E.H. Peck, 6 September 1965, FO371/180588, PRO

therefore wrote to the British Embassy on 6 September to seek its opinion. The reaction from Washington did not come until the end of October and was extremely cool in relation to Cable's suggestion of 'frank' discussions with the Americans on Vietnam. Nigel Trench of the British Embassy in Washington wrote that 'we do not believe that the time is yet ripe for a "no holds barred" exchange of views'. The reason why the British Embassy 'would advise strongly against' any such action, was that it did not believe American

> thinking has reached a point where either we or they would get the best out of frank talks. Indeed, at the working level there is remarkably little indication that their thinking is anywhere near a coherent policy, and the Australians have reached very much the same conclusion. You may think that this is a sign either of short-sightedness or of a basic reluctance to consider negotiations at all, now that the situation on the ground in South Vietnam has reached a slightly more hopeful stage, but I do not think that this is the case.[125]

It was also pointed out that 'the State Department at least - and I believe also the political side of the Pentagon - are under no illusions as to the determination of the North Vietnamese'.[126] Trench also conveyed that apart from the question of timing:

> H.M.G.'s chances of influencing negotiations in the direction we think desirable would be prejudiced if we tried to push the Americans into discussions on the basis of a British paper. In view of our position as Co-Chairman they will naturally want in due course to take us into their confidence, if only to ensure that we play the game in the way that they think most effective, but since they are bearing the brunt of the fighting and expense, they would probably wonder why we thought we had the right to tell them how to play the hand, and this could lessen our chances of influencing them in the right direction. We must not forget that both their position and ours have changed since 1954, although this

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125 Letter from N.C.C. Trench to J.E. Cable, 26 October 1965, FO371/180588/DV1075/187 (F), PRO

126 Ibid

> does not mean the U.S. Government underestimate the value of the support which their Vietnam policy has received from H.M.G.

Trench therefore suggested the British Embassy keep a very careful watch on the situation and inform London when the time was right for negotiations with the Johnson administration.[127] By December 1965 the Foreign Office concluded that 'in the international field no further initiatives are being planned.[128]

The July Decision to Americanize the War in Vietnam

When General William Westmoreland, Head of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) requested an additional 150,000 troops in late June 1965, the Johnson administration debated the utility of a major US troop commitment in Vietnam. Their deliberations took five weeks until 28 July when President Johnson made up his mind and committed the United States to a ground war in South Vietnam. He did not make this decision easily and knew the odds against achieving the goal of an independent, anti-communist South were great. But most of his advisers, military and civilian, felt that even though it would be a long war with little chance of winning, the alternatives would be disastrous in terms of US prestige and credibility. The President therefore announced his decision to send 50,000 troops to Vietnam immediately, bringing the total number of troops stationed there to 125,000. He also admitted that 'additional forces will be needed later, and they will be sent as requested'.[129]

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127 Ibid

128 Foreign Office Minute, No date (December 1965), FO371/180589, PRO

129 Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p. 160; Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 153, Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, p. xii

After the December 1964 refusal by Wilson to send troops to Vietnam, the Americans were reluctant to ask Britain to reconsider, at least not directly. British involvement was still, however, very much desired. In discussions of a British troop commitment, American hopes and desires varied widely. The fact that Rusk talked of a brigade and Bundy of a platoon or a batallion indicates the request for military help was largely for symbolic purposes. A brigade would have been a substantial commitment on the part of Great Britain, perhaps involving up to 6,000 troops. A platoon, on the other hand, would have been a much smaller gesture, involving only 12-24 soldiers. The precise figures appear to have been irrelevant; the important thing was the conspicuous presence of the British flag.

In early July 1965, according to the Australian foreign minister, Mr. Hanluck, Dean Rusk stated to him that,

> whilst the US Government had not asked for any British contribution in Viet Nam and had no intention of making any such request, the British would be well advised to send a brigade to Viet Nam if they valued American public opinion. In Mr. Rusk's view any such British gesture would have an immense impact on the US.[130]

Shortly before publicly announcing the Americanization of the Vietnam war, the President sent a message to 29 countries contributing assistance to Vietnam, including Great Britain. The message served two purposes. Firstly it served as a warning of the American decision to commit to a land war. Secondly, the President asked for further third party help in the conflict. While reassuring the message recipients that in addition to this major additional military effort he would also

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[130] Telegram Canberra to Mr. Kinber, Commonwealth Relations Officer, 7 July 1965, "Vietnam" British Involvement" PREM 13/696, PRO

continue to make every political and diplomatic effort to find peace, and that US objectives would still be the same, he argued for a multilateral effort.

> In this situation I must express to you my deep personal conviction that the prospect of peace in Vietnam will be greatly increased in the measure that the necessary efforts of the US are supported and shared by other nations. I know that your Government has already signalled its interest and concern by giving assistance. I now ask that you give most earnest consideration to increasing that assistance in ways which will give a clear signal to the world - and perhaps specifically to Hanoi - of the solidarity of international support for resistance to aggression in Vietnam and to a peaceful settlement in Vietnam.[131]

Unlike Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and the Philippines, who immediately expressed a willingness to consider an additional effort, the British did not respond straight away.[132] Instead the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister discussed the message for four days before informing Patrick Dean on 30 July that 'as there was no explicit request for a British military contribution' it was 'better to say nothing about this' in the Prime Minister's reply. Instead, the Foreign Secretary instructed Dean to make it clear to McGeorge Bundy orally or 'in whatever way you think best' that:

> there is in fact no question of a British military contribution, no matter how small, to the war in Viet Nam. Not only do I want to forestall another and more explicit message to the PM but, the longer hopes of a British military contribution are cherished in Washington, the greater the risks of a leak and of Anglo-American disagreement becoming public knowledge.

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131 President to Prime Minister, 26 July 1965, PREM 13/697, PRO

132 Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and the Philippines.

The task of straight-talking was delegated to the Ambassador, who was given a long list of arguments he could make use of. [133] He could stress, amongst other things, Britain's existing, and planned, civilian and surgical role in Vietnam; that a military contribution would be to the detriment of Britain's defence of Malaysia; the political repercussions of a British military role in Vietnam; and the British belief that an increased British role in Vietnam 'might well compromise our position as Co-Chairman of the Geneva Conference'.[134]

Given Stewart's open and heartfelt support of US policy in Vietnam, it is surprising how strongly he felt over this latest request, although no doubt his position was delivered more diplomatically by the Ambassador. Despite his own personal feelings on the issue, Stewart clearly recognised the political balancing act Wilson faced in trying to keep his own party behind him while remaining loyal to Britain's major ally. Considering that Britain was at the time delicately negotiating with the Americans regarding the latest sterling scare, the vehemence of Stewart's views, however indirectly expressed, reflected the fact that sticking to the 'no troops' position was imperative if the Labour Government wanted to ensure its own survival. Stewart outlined this in further detail for Dean, saying that the President,

> himself such a master politician, will readily appreciate what an effort it has been, in terms of the British political situation, for Ministers to maintain as much support as they have of American policy in Viet Nam, not least at a time when economic difficulties have compelled them to follow domestic policies falling short of the hopes of their supporters. Ministers have only been able to maintain their Viet Nam policy, because they have been able to assure critics that Britain is at least not involved militarily. Our attitude has also been of great benefit to the United States

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133 Telegram, Stewart to Dean, Washington, 30 July 1965, PREM 13/696, PRO

134 Ibid

> Government in terms of international opinion, if our example has helped to restrain a number of European and Commonwealth countries from giving more vocal and forcible expression to their own apprehension about the course of American policy in Viet Nam. In many cases these other Governments are also under pressure from their Parliaments or public opinion.[135]

Wilson's official reply to Johnson on 2 August was nowhere near as blunt, and on the contrary, was extremely supportive verbally, at times even sycophantic:

> I have followed with admiration the careful balance you have throughout maintained between determined resistance to aggression and a patient insistence on your readiness to negotiate a honourable settlement.... In the face of the persistent North Vietnamese refusal to negotiate, I can see no alternative to your policy of strengthening your forces in South Vietnam.

Nevertheless in relation to the request for additional practical help, Wilson did repeat some of Stewart's arguments.

> I wish there was more we could do to help you, but I need not remind you how far our contribution to international peace-keeping has already overstrained our resources and our economy... Moreover, I should be loath to run the risk of spoiling any chance we may have fulfilling the functions which were originally accepted as Co-Chairman of the Geneva Conference and have more recently tried to develop afresh by means of the Commonwealth initiative.[136]

Dean delivered the Prime Minister's message to the President via McGeorge Bundy. At the time the President was in Texas but Bundy thanked Dean on the President's behalf and described the Prime Minister's reply as 'a help'. He also said the President was 'well aware of the very great difficulty in political terms of a British military contribution at the present time' but admitted that 'the important

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135 Ibid

136 Message from Prime Minister to President Johnson, 2 August, 1965, PREM 13/696, PRO

thing from the President's point of view was to have made the request.' Afterwards, Dean reminded the Foreign Secretary that it would be 'most helpful' if he could tell Bundy that progress was being made in providing police advisers and getting a civilian surgical team together.[137] Towards the end of September, a British Medical Project for Vietnam had been assembled, initially led by a physician from Great Ormond Street Hospital. On hearing the news of the successful arrangement of the medical team, Wilson commented to Oliver Wright, 'I take it we are telling the Americans.'[138]

This high-level approach on Vietnam was, however, only part of the picture. Britain's position on Vietnam was also being discussed fervently, and in detail in relation to the latest sterling crisis and Britain's on-going defence review.

The Future of Anglo-American Relations: Vietnam, East of Suez and Sterling

At the beginning of June, the Johnson administration began to consider its options should the British economy, and the pound in particular, run into difficulties before winter.[139] Considering the President's growing impatience with the British, particularly over Vietnam, it was felt increasingly necessary to explain the Labour Government's problems to the President. David Klein, a White House aide, drafted a memo for the President outlining the shape of the trouble for Anglo-American relations. Britain's economic problems, particularly its balance of payments deficit, continued, and although Wilson had rejected devaluation and 'tried to meet the

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137 Telegram from Dean to Stewart, Tel. No. 1984, 2 August 1965, PREM 13/696, PRO

138 Memo from J.E. Rednall, Private Secretary, Minister of Overseas Development to Oliver Wright, Medical Project for Vietnam, 20 September, 1965 with handwritten note by the Prime Minister, PREM 13/1271, PRO

139 For further details on the debate taking place in Washington durng this period see John Dumbrell, 'The Johnson Administration and the British Labour Government: Vietnam, The Pound and East of Suez', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 30, Pt. 2, (August 1996)

problem through tight money, tight budget, import restrictions, controls on capital movements and 'persuasion' on the wage-price front', the Americans were worried that this might not keep the speculators quiet.[140]

In the face of another attack on sterling, it was thought that Wilson would have the choice of either dampening the economy even more and risking a full-blown recession; imposing full-fledged exchange controls; devaluing; or letting things slide until the speculators forced a devaluation. The result of the latter two options would have serious consequences for the US, by producing 'heavy and sustained pressure on the dollar' and the serious possibility that Britain would turn inward and would move 'away from selective international responsibilities'.[141]

Klein explained to the President, in some detail, British weariness of sterling difficulties:

> the strain of coping day by day compounds the trouble. Ministers, reportedly, have lost a lot of steam. So have senior civil servants on whom any British Government depends. Walking their economic tightrope soaks up energy, saps initiatives, and colors their approach to every policy, emphatically including their political commitments overseas. Not only must they now consider cutting back commitments, they are also hard put to conceive of adding anything. This adds to their difficulty in responding to you in Vietnam.

Klein also warned the President that 'considering the mood in London, tired and beset, there is also need on our side for great care about the tone'.[142] Moreover, he alerted Johnson to the increasingly negative image of the US in Britain:

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[140] Draft Memoradum for the President from David Klein, 1 June 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 215, File: UK, Trendex (Burke Trend), 4/65-8/65, LBJL

[141] Ibid

[142] Ibid

> on Wilson's left and Home's right there is a considerable amount of latent anti-Americanism. Santo Domingo and Viet Nam are sources of native irritation to some parts of the public, the press and even the bureaucracy. Our hard sell on behalf of our own aircraft (and other weapons) in markets coveted by the Englishmen doesn't help.[143]

If the British did retrench abroad and devalue at home, Klein considered the areas where this would impact on the US. If the overseas cuts came they would occur in Europe and/or East of Suez. If the British army on the Rhine (BAOR) was cut back unilaterally then the Germans:

> will make new demands on us, and certainly will make it hard for us to withdraw U.S. troops by mutual consent. (If British forces remain at present strength, we might be able to negotiate some reduction in the U.S. presence.)[144]

If the reductions were made East of Suez, this would not only be a serious problem for the US financially and militarily but would also leave the US in the position of lone world policeman in some areas:

> It is useful for us to have their flag, not ours, "out front" in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf—in areas where they have long historical associations. For we might be very much better off to pay for part of their presence—if they really can not afford it—than finance our own.

Klein believed that 'as the summer advances we shall have to make our minds up on a lot of these, and also on our fundamental attitude toward Britain's role as our ally in Asia and in Europe'. He therefore warned of the need for 'interagency coordination both of substance and timing' as London undertook a variety of

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143 Ibid
144 Ibid

consultations and negotiations at departmental level, with Treasury, Defense and State. A contingency group was therefore set up to co-ordinate a response should the British ask for further help with sterling. This group included George Ball (under-Secretary of State), Henry Fowler (Secretary to the Teasury), Henry Martin (Federal Reserve), McGeorge Bundy (White House aide) and Robert McNamara (Defense).

It was expected that a British plea would come during the visit of James Callaghan, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, to Washington at the end of June to meet with Fowler, McNamara and Gardner Ackley, , Chairman of the Economic Advisers, and to visit the International Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the Federal Reserve Board. Wilson was aware that Washington was generally opposed to linking the fate of sterling with the dollar. Nevertheless he still had hopes that during Callaghan's visit the US government would publicly announce its intention to give full support to maintaining the position of sterling. Interestingly, Bruce noted in his diary that Wilson

> is justified in expecting from us gratitude for his unvarying defense thus far of our policy in Vietnam. On the other hand, I doubt his awareness of how this is simply taken for granted at home.[145]

When Wilson asked if the President would see Callaghan while he was in Washington, McGeorge Bundy anticipated this would be to discuss the pound. He told Johnson that he had discussed this issue with other advisers:

> We had a full discussion on the British problem in Joe Fowler's office and we are all agreed that we should not make any deals with the British on the Pound. Any deals we make should be put together in terms of our overall interests—political and economic,

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[145] Bruce diaries, 24 June 1965

> as well as monetary. None of us expects this kind of deal can be made with Callaghan. It will have to be a bargain at a higher and broader level.[146]

In the event very little was decided during Callaghan's visit, and, indeed, McNamara and Callaghan appear to have 'spoken at cross-purposes'. McNamara was 'only interested in Britain maintaining her political commitment on the Rhine and East of Suez,' while Callaghan felt that 'his over-riding concern was finance and that he could only under-take to do what he could pay for'.[147]

As it happened, the 28 July decision to Americanize the war in Vietnam and Johnson's request for more aid from Britain coincided with another sterling crisis. During June British reserves had fallen by £24 million and by another £50 million in July. This was despite Britain's overseas borrowing facility. And although the balance of payments situation had improved, there was still a lack of confidence in the financial world as the British economy still appeared to be overheating. July therefore saw heavy exchange losses.[148] On both sides of the Atlantic there was a recognition that a full reassessment of Anglo-American relations now seemed in order.

Washington considered the matter urgent and began discussing its available options in more detail. The British soon got wind of this. When Bruce met with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary on 25 July, Wilson told the Ambassador that in a recent discussion with Richard Neustadt:

> It had become very clear that every aspect of Anglo-United

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[146]McGeorge Bundy to President, 28 June 1965, NSF, Memos for President, LBJL

[147] Record of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and the US Ambassador at 7.30 pm at No. 10 Downing Street on 26 July 1965, PREM 13/572, PRO

[148]Nicholas Woodward, 'Labour's Economic Performance, 1964-70' in Coopey, Fielding, Tiratsoo, *Wilson Governments*, p. 170 & *Barbara Castle diaries*, p. 26

> States relations, every question of policy that the Government had to decide, every point of view about the future shape of the world was part of the same problem.

He concluded that Anglo-American relations could be at a 'turning point'.[149]

Bruce agreed with Wilson that there was a need for a broader look at the 'whole complex of problems' but when Wilson suggested it might be time to have another talk with the President, the Ambassador recommended instead that Sir Burke Trend, Secretary to the Cabinet, should go straightaway to Washington and, while there, explore the possibilities of a top-level talk in September. Sensing a crisis might develop that week, the Prime Minister thought 'this was going about things in too leisurely a fashion'. In addition the ongoing defence review was due to report by September and the British government would like 'a preliminary run over the ground with the U.S. administration' before any decisions were taken.

Washington, however, had not yet formulated a response to events in Britain. There were open divisions within the Johnson administration on how to deal with the problem. Clearly, discussions over the pound were taking place in between discussing the wisdom of the proposal massively to increase US involvement in Vietnam. Not surprisingly, the two problems could not be kept apart in the minds of many within the White House, State Department and the Treasury.

On the lunchtime of 26 July, Bruce cabled Rusk to advise him that the British cabinet would be meeting the next day to consider further deflationary measures proposed by Chancellor James Callaghan. Bruce warned that if these measures were not accepted, or proved ineffective in restoring confidence, then in his opinion 'we will witness almost immediate terrifying run on the pound, with presently

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149 Record of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and the United States Ambassador at 7.30 pm at No. 10 Downing Street, 25 July 1965, PREM 13/672, PRO

incalculable consequences ... we would probably be faced with alternatives of British devaluation or full support of pound by ourselves'.[150]

The same day McGeorge Bundy telephoned Derek Mitchell at 10 Downing Street to talk about 'money matters.' Bundy made it clear that Callaghan's intended programme 'might not be adequate to protect sterling', instead advising stronger measures to 'convince the speculators and bankers that the Wilson government is in earnest about saving the pound'. Washington strongly recommended 'action on the regulator, with respect to fuels and consumer durables; much higher minimum down payment and short maturities on hire purchase; quantification of expenditure cuts'.[151]

In reply, Mitchell explained to Bundy that not only did British economists think it dangerous to compress demand further than Callaghan's planned measures intended, it would be 'very difficult to swallow politically'.[152] Regardless, Bundy also suggested a six-month wage-price freeze as a possible dramatic alternative and emphasised the need to stay in close touch about developments.

The next day the Chancellor told the Cabinet first and then the House that further deflationary measures were needed because demand was continuing to rise and exports were not rising enough. The key provisions of his statement included a drastic reduction in planned public expenditure: defence expenditure for the coming year would be reduced by £100 million; building programmes for hospitals, schools and houses were frozen and local authority lending would be reduced by placing restrictions on mortgages. In addition hire-purchase provisions were tightened and

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150 Bruce to Rusk & Fowler, 26 July, 1965, Re: Sterling, Declassified Documents Series

151 Memorandum for the Record, Subject: Bundy-Derek Mitchell Conversation, 26 July, 9.05 pm, Situation Room, July 28 1965, Declassified Documents Series

152 Ibid

restrictions were placed on private investments.[153] Consequently the Americans were not overly impressed by Callaghan's statement, or his apparent spurning of their suggestions, which might explain the events of the next few days.

Burke Trend became a conduit of information and ideas between the British and American governments. The Treasury Department noted that 'a principal purpose of Trendex is for us to pump Trend about the PM's thinking on what he might do and want from us'. However, it was acknowledged that,

> a more delicate part of the exercise has to do with what we say or don't say about our intentions. Both sides understand that the purpose is not to negotiate but to explore each other's thinking -- central staff to central staff.[154]

Shortly before Trend visited Washington on 29 and 30 July, the contingency group had a series of meetings and communications in preparation, and a protracted debate about the fate of sterling ensued. Bundy sent a memo to the President regarding their next day's meeting with Joe Fowler, to discuss the prospects of an imminent sterling crisis and the 'conditions' for rescue action. Bundy acknowledged that he wanted to attend the meeting because his opposite number in Britain, Trend, was coming for a meeting planned months ago.

> … there is a sense of urgency in his coming just now which gives me a feeling that the Prime Minister is trying to set the stage for a private understanding with you. I already know enough to be tough with Trend on this, but I want to be sure to use this meeting to get the right message to the Prime Minister, so that when and if there is a crisis your bargaining position will be the way you want it.[155]

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153 Hansard. 27 July 1965, Balance of Payments: Government Measures, Vol. 717, Col. 229-232

154 Francis Bator, Preparation for Trend, 6.00pm, 28 July 1965, Declassified Documents Series

155 Memo for the President from McGeorge Bundy, 28 July, 1965, Subject: Your Meeting with Joe Fowler at 12.30 Tomorrow, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 215, File: UK, Trendex (Burke Trend), 4/65-8/65, LBJL

Bundy hoped that the Fowler meeting would be 'a useful first stage in making sure that we all understand each other as well on sterling as we have come to do in Vietnam in the last seven days', during which time the Johnson administration had agreed to fight a ground war in Vietnam. [156] He recognised that Fowler and the Treasury would be most interested in emphasising to the British that devaluation would be disastrous for both countries, but added that his own interests, and those of McNamara and Rusk,

> are wider. We are concerned with the fact that the British are constantly trying to make narrow bargains on money while they cut back on their wider political and military responsibilities. We want to make sure that the British get it into their heads that it makes no sense for us to rescue the pound in a situation in which there is no British flag in Vietnam, and a threatened British thin-out in both east of Suez and in Germany.

He also admitted,

> What I would like to say to Trend myself, is that a British Brigade in Vietnam would be worth a billion dollars at the moment of truth for sterling. But I don't want to say it unless you want it said.

On Wednesday 28 July Fowler, Ball, Martin and MacBundy met to discuss further what advice to give the British on sterling. They concluded that the UK should be told that devaluation was 'unthinkable' and that it could not be permitted. When Gardner Ackley heard this, he immediately penned a memo to the President disagreeing with this apparent consensus in thinking. He informed Johnson that while he was 'no advocate of devaluation', and hoped and thought it could be avoided, he saw 'serious danger' in telling the British 'that it cannot under any

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156 Ibid

circumstances be permitted'. Ackley felt that the US might be committed indefinitely and unlimitedly to unilateral rescue operations and that this would be more dangerous in the long run than devaluation as confidence could be lost in the dollar as well as the pound, especially if the UK 'was failing to take measures to put its house in order'.[157]

In the event, after talking to Fowler on the morning of 29 July, Ackley decided not to send the memo to the President. Fowler had tried to convince Ackley that the previous day's meeting had come to the same conclusions. Nevertheless, Ackley remained unsure that this was the case and said so to Bundy in a note later that day:

> My basic point is that the UK has to make its own decision as to whether the costs are worth it. If they hold back because we ask them to, or demand it, it's not going to work and we will end up holding the bag. We can argue that devaluation is unnecessary; that it would be bad for them, for us, and the world. But if we can't persuade them, it won't work. Whatever we tell them, it's also important what we tell ourselves. If we say it's unthinkable, the end of the world, we'll get hung up with a unilateral rescue.[158]

Ball was well aware of this and was at pains to convince the rest of the administration. It appears that initially the President, McNamara and McGeorge Bundy all favoured at least asking the British for a brigade for Vietnam.[159] Ball argued that the British were in no position to send a brigade at the present time and if they were asked to in connection to financial talks, their 'play' would be to refuse: 'They will say if this is the price they have to pay they will devalue ... the British

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157 Memo to the President from Gardner Ackley, NSF, Country File, UK, Balance of Payments Crisis, 1965, Subject: Advice to the UK, 29 July 1965. Not sent.

158 Handwritten note from Gardner Ackley to McGeorge Bundy, 29 July 1965, NSF Countries, UK, Box 215, File: UK Balance of Payments Crisis 1965, LBJL

159 Fowler/Ball Telcon, 29 July 1965, 10.20 am, LBJL

would say we were making Hessions [sic] out of their soldiers.'[160] According to Fowler, McNamara also said he would give the British 'an extra billion dollars for one brigade'.[161] Ball and Fowler agreed this would in effect be making mercenaries out of British soldiers. Later that morning Ball attempted to convince Bundy that the British would say their troops were not for sale. He hoped McNamara would not bring up the question of a Vietnam brigade in the context of US help for the balance of payments problem.[162]

Bundy was not convinced on either point, arguing 'if they really want to do business with Lyndon Johnson they have to take into account his basic problems'. And as far as he was concerned the basic premise of the Trend visit was that 'it would not be in any one context' and although he agreed that the US did not want to be 'buying troops', he maintained 'it is equally important that we get it clear in the British heads', and he did not think it was ' clear that Lyndon Johnson will even do a short run rescue operation'. [163]

Ball differentiated between the short-term rescue of the pound, which would not allow room for political discussions, and 'from the beginning we can insist on the maintenance of the British existing commitment around the world' and the more medium term. He recognised that the British had 'two weapons—two levers'. Firstly a 'pullback from commitments around the world' and this would be popular domestically. And 'if he were Wilson he would play this as his first card with the Americans because ... it would be most costly to have to pick them up rather than a

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160 Ibid

161 Ibid

162 MacBundy/Ball Telecon, 29 July 1965, 11.15 am, LBJL

163 Ibid

one-time bailout'. The second lever was to say that 'if they can get no help they will have no option but to devalue big'.[164]

Bundy felt the British would not devalue, whereas Ball 'thought it a question of a balance of risks from our point of view ... and at the end of the day we may have to be prepared to do something which we don't want to do even though the British don't meet our own demands more than 50%'. Bundy agreed and thought the problem was a 'tactical one to get the maximum out of the situation ... our side is pretty much stonewalled'.[165]

Overall Bundy was adamant the British should 'not be under the illusion they can come to the President through the Treasury and make a money deal without our getting certain satisfaction on some political points. There will be strings attached to any short term thing.'[166]

At Ball's suggestion, Bundy agreed to mention to McNamara 'not to inject anything too explicitly because he [McNamara] is a little insensitive to the kinds of reaction he might get from these people.'[167] Francis Bator agreed with Gardner Ackley about 'thinking about the unthinkable'.

> Vietnam is our paramount problem and what they say and do about it is bound to influence Washington's view of Anglo-American relations. How concrete should we be on what we would like from them?[168]

As regards the possibility of a British troop reduction East of Suez or in the British Army on the Rhine (BAOR), it was felt that 'anything which could be regarded as

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164 Ibid
165 Ibid
166 Ibid
167 MacBundy/Ball Telecon, 29 July 1965, 11.15 am
168 Agenda, Preparation for Trend, 28 July 1965 by Francis Bator, Declassified Documents Series

even a partial British withdrawal from overseas responsibilities is bound to lead to an agonizing reappraisal here'. The sterling link was made clear:

> We have a hint from Dick Neustadt in London that, whereas Brown and presumably Callaghan have the point loud and clear, the PM might not realize that UK performance on overseas defense is tightly linked with what we might do for them on money. On the other hand, we will wish to avoid giving them a sense that a threat of 'disengagement or money' will give them the keys to Fort Knox.[169]

The British wanted an open-ended US declaration of support for the pound. Bundy met with Trend on Thursday 29 and Friday 30 July and 'had a long and searching discussion'. The Americans put the British on notice that devaluation 'would be destructive to all concerned' and that a rescue package would have to be multilateral and therefore 'accompanied by a package that can be sold to European bankers'. But Bundy informed the President that 'in accordance with your instructions, I kept the two subjects of the pound sterling and Vietnam completely separate'.[170]

By 6 August the Americans decided that they should place two firm conditions on their support for the pound.

a. That the British agree to maintain fully their worldwide defense commitments;

b. That they agree to take whatever additional internal measures are necessary to make possible multilateralizing a rescue effort.[171]

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169 MacBundy/Ball Telecon, 29 July 1965, 11.15 am,

170 Memo for the President from Bundy, Subject: News from the British Front, 2 August 1965, NSF, Memos to President from Bundy, Vol. 13, August 1965, LBJL

171 George Ball, British Sterling Crisis, NSF, Countries, UK, Trendex (Burke Trend), 6 August 1965, LBJL

Ball recognised that if the British did not comply with these conditions and opted for devaluation, this would 'almost certainly turn the UK away from support of US policies (including South Vietnam) and substantially increase anti-Americanism in Britain.'[172] There were risks on both sides in this diplomatic game of blind man's bluff.

By September, an 'understanding' had been reached. George Ball met with Wilson in London on 8 and 9 September. Bundy later informed the President that, 'it took two talks for Wilson to agree to the association between our defense of the pound and their overseas commitments'. He also noted that

> the one thing which he was apparently trying to avoid was a liability in Vietnam, and you will recall that it was your own wisdom that prevented us from making any such connection in the summer, although I did once informally say to one of the Prime Minister's people that a battalion would be worth a billion—a position which I explicitly changed later.[173]

It seems, however, that the British did not have the same recollection of the conversation. Indeed, there was some confusion as to whether 'strings' had or had not been attached to American support of the pound. According to the Foreign Office, on 9 September, Ball had been 'at pains to emphasise that no specific price, in defence or foreign policy, was being extracted from H.M.G. in exchange for American help over the pound'. Apparently Ball had said 'this [i.e. support for sterling] did not necessarily imply that in any particular situation quid pro quos were

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172 Ibid

173 Memo for the President from Bundy, 10 September 1965, NSF, Memos to the President from Bundy, Vol. 14, 9/1/-9/22/65, LBJL

involved'.[174] The Foreign Office concern, however, was that the implication of Ball's words were that,

> the U.S. Government assume that they and H.M.G. have common general objectives to which H.M.G. are expected to adhere. It might also carry the implication that in some situations (nature undefined) the U.S. Government might feel entitled to ask for a quid pro quo.[175]

Wilson apparently 'turned the argument by asserting as axiomatic the fact that we have "world-wide responsibilities" like the US, that we want to carry them out, but cannot of course do so unless we are freed from the pressure of economic stringency.'[176] T. W. Garvey of the Foreign Office read this to mean that Britain intends 'to continue to do the various things that we are doing 'East of Suez' and elsewhere; but that we rely on the Americans to bail us out if we run out of money; or alternatively, reserve our right to alter our policies.'[177] Garvey's worry was the extent to which H.M.G. might be 'inhibited by the recent sterling support operation and its undertones from adopting policies in particular which are uncongenial to the U.S. Government'. He concluded by asserting that 'we are not, however, as a result of American support for sterling, ipso facto inhibited from pursuing our own interests where they and US interests conflict'.[178]

Bundy, however, said 'pretty categorically' to Sir Burke Trend that there was a quid pro quo. One Foreign Office official surmised that

> the difference may only reflect the more diplomatic approach

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174 Foreign Office minute, T.W. Garvey to Sir C. O'Neill, 21 September 1965, FO371/179587 AU1159/4, PRO
175 Ibid
176 Ibid
177 Ibid
178 Ibid

> of the State Department; it may, however reflect a difference in policies between the White House and the State Department. If so, in this context, I think it would be wise to assume that White House policies would prevail.

Others thought the discrepancy either 'more apparent than real' or that there was no basic discrepancy 'both said sterling and defence were linked; neither tied the linkage to any particular quid pro quo; both implied the need for consultation before any action affecting defence commitments'.[179]

While the British Foreign Office decided there was no clear 'understanding' on sterling, by the end of the year Michael Palliser and Burke Trend had decided it would be worth while commissioning a study on 'the extent to which, in financial terms, the Americans might be partly dependent on us as well as we on them'.[180]

Domestic Pressure on Wilson - August-December 1965

By the time of the Labour Party Conference beginning in late September, dissent over Vietnam was widespread within the Labour movement. Although the summer recess in Parliament had given the Labour leadership some relief from direct harassment, Wilson and Stewart were well aware of the dangers of the Conference disintegrating over Vietnam. The National Executive Committee were again persuaded to include a favourable reference to Vietnam in its foreign policy statement, concentrating on the Government's peacemaking efforts.[181] The fact that the Vietnam statement came within the wider foreign policy one, that included

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[179]G.C. Mayhew, Foreign Office Minute, 13 October 1965, FO371/179587 AU1559/4, PRO

[180] Letter from P. Rogers, Cabinet Office to Michael Palliser, 29 December 1965, FO371/179587, PRO

[181] Foreign Policy Statement by the National Executive Committee presented to the Annual Conference, 27 September-1 October 1965, Blackpool, NEC Minutes, May-December 1965, p. 681

sections on the United Nations and Overseas Aid, meant that it would 'appeal to Labour idealists' and was therefore unlikely to be defeated in a vote.[182]

In his speech to the Conference, the Foreign Secretary expanded on the NEC's foreign policy report. The general debate that followed was dominated by questions and comments on Vietnam. In his foreign policy address, the Prime Minister boasted, 'Britain counts again in world affairs' because 'Britain's power, Britain's influence ...depends ... on a Government with ideas, a Government aligned and attuned to the 1965 world we are living in.' Much of the speech was directed to Vietnam and Wilson specifically answered the charge made in the earlier debate and elsewhere that the Government's policy was linked to US economic aid:

> even though we were being asked by the United States Government to put British troops in Vietnam ... neither then nor at any other time was there an attempt to link the financial co-operation with any aspect whatsoever of foreign policy.[183]

Given Wilson's recent 'understanding' with the Americans over sterling and East of Suez, this was, of course, a distortion of the truth to say the least.

Wilson also argued that British support for US action in Vietnam 'no more invalidates our ability to act as co-chairman and to bring the parties to the conference table than Russian support for Hanoi invalidates their ability to act in this way, because it was always understood from Geneva onwards that one chairman (and there are two) broadly represents the views of the west and the other the views of the

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[182] Craig Wilson, "Rhetoric, Reality and Dissent: The Vietnam Policy of the British Labour Government, 1964-1970," *Social Science Journal,* Vol. 23, No. 1, 1986, pp. 17-31

[183] Report of the 64th Annual Conference of the Labour Party, Blackpool, 27 September-1 October 1965 (Transport House, Smith Square, London SW1), p, 198

east.'[184] He also denied that the British position of support for the Americans on Vietnam meant his Government was servile.

> Is it not realised how much of the pressure we have put on bring the Americans to the conference table has been related to our position in these matters? We have spoken out frankly. The Foreign Secretary expressed what we felt about napalm and about the use of gas, but that does not invalidate our general position so far as the Americans in Vietnam are concerned.[185]

There were also two composite motions. The first one asked the Conference, amongst other things, to condemn American intervention in Vietnam and was defeated on a voice vote. The second more moderate and more specific composite asked the Conference to call upon the Government to dissociate itself from American policies and military operations in Vietnam. This composite went to a card vote and was defeated by almost a two to one majority. Still, a large section of the Conference was clearly unhappy with Government policy on Vietnam.[186]

Early in September and before Parliament resumed, William Warbey resigned the Labour whip because of his disagreement with the Government's Vietnam policy. Given the Government's narrow majority, Wilson noted that this action 'again underlined our vulnerable position'.[187] Even the Foreign Office was increasingly concerned about the state of public opinion on Vietnam, believing the war's declining popularity could easily be explained.

> While much is being done to counterbalance the highly publicised opposition to Her Majesty's Government's policy, we believe our

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184 Ibid
185 Ibid
186 Ibid
187 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 137

> efforts would be more effective if we had a more adequate knowledge of the factors influencing that opposition, especially as it is by no means confined to Communists, fellow-travellers and professional anti-Americans. [188]

The Foreign Office therefore proposed, and the Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister agreed, that a 'small but sophisticated' public opinion poll be carried out.

As Murray Maclehose at the Foreign Office acknowledged, 'so far as the Foreign Office is concerned a poll of this kind would be an innovation: nominally, at least, we have no responsibility for public opinion in this country' but in breaking 'fresh ground' the poll would 'ascertain not only people's views on Viet-Nam but, above all, how they arrived at them'.[189] The Prime Minister received the preliminary results on 19 November and the full report on 14 December. Essentially, the majority of Britain's elites supported the Government's policy on Vietnam, although more Conservatives did than Labourites.[190]

However, by the end of November Wilson reported to Robert McNamara that 'Vietnam was no longer really a political problem in Britain'.[191] Wilson knew that although his Vietnam policy continued to cause dissent within the Labour Party, Johnson's Baltimore speech and the rejection of the various peace moves by the communists had helped secure the line that the Americans were willing to talk.[192]

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[188] Letter from C.M. Maclehose, Foreign Office to Oliver Wright, 10 Downing Street, 8 September 1965, PREM 13/689, PRO

[189] Ibid

[190] "Vietnam: British Elite Opinion", December 1965, PREM 13/689, PRO

[191] Extract from a Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the United States Secretary of Defence, Mr. Robert McNamara, at luncheon at 10 Downing Street on Friday, 26 November, 1965, PREM 13/1271, PRO

[192] The President reported after his December meeting with Wilson that the Prime Minister "says his line has been steady since the Baltimore speech. Wilson tell his opposition to bring the Viet Cong to a conference table and he'll produce the President." FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. III, p. 645

Wilson's Visit to Washington, December 15-17

Despite the negative portrayal of the relationship between Harold Wilson and Lyndon Johnson in the press, the British Prime Minister maintained his belief that relations were close and friendly. This was because comments coming from Washington, from Patrick Dean in particular, carried more weight with him than journalistic gossip. In August of 1965, Wilson got feedback from Dean suggesting he had every reason to be confident in the apparent strength of his relationship with Johnson. The President had seated himself next to the British Ambassador during an Ambassadorial dinner on a boat sailing down the River Potomac. Dean wrote to Stewart that the President 'spoke in the highest terms of yourself and the Prime Minister and said that he realised only too well how difficult it had been for Her Majesty's Government to continue to support US policy in Vietnam with so small a majority in Parliament and in the face of much criticism from the press and other quarters'.[193] The President apparently 'spoke bitterly of the criticism to which he had been subjected in some of the British newspapers' and Dean thought this an 'interesting confirmation of our existing impression that such a dominant and successful character as the President should be so extremely sensitive to personal criticism, particularly of the type of intimate, gossipy remarks which are exemplified in "The Observer" articles.'[194] Dean thought the final 'interesting' thing that the President asked was to 'convey to the Prime Minister his best wishes and to inform him that he was ready to help him in facing our current problems in any way he

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193 Letter to Michael Stewart from Patrick Dean, British Embassy, Washington, 12 August 1965, FO371/179573, PRO
194 Ibid

could.' Dean also thought that the fact that the President had been willing to spend so much time talking to him,

> goes to show I think that the President and the Administration generally ... really are anxious to continue the close co-operation with us in all possible fields and that, although at times they are irritated by press and other forms of criticism, they recognise that our continued support is of real value to them. In order to preserve it I think they are prepared to go quite a long way to help us in our current difficulties, provided that they remain satisfied that we are ready to continue to help ourselves and do our share in the world.[195]

Dean emphasised, however, that:

> although our position in this respect is fairly strong, we are definitely not in a position to exert undue pressure or influence on the Americans. They are willing to help us and to talk things over with us extremely frankly, partly because they realise that it is in their interests to do so; but if they were to lose confidence in either of these they would not, with their present resources, find it difficult, although they would regret it, to ignore us altogether and to go their own way. In these circumstances, we have obviously a good deal of room for manoeuvre and a reasonable chance of influencing them in the conduct of their affairs, and we should certainly do so, provided we use the right methods and speak frankly to them.[196]

Despite Dean's generally positive assessment of the climate in Washington, Wilson's visit in December was not expected to be easy. Lyndon Johnson was recovering from a gall bladder operation carried out on 7 October which had resulted in the President being hospitalized for two weeks in Bethesda Naval Hospital. Still recovering from surgery, the President was seeing Wilson in between two other state visits: President Ayub Khan of Pakistan was due to meet Johnson on the 14

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195 Ibid
196 Ibid

December, Wilson on 15 and 17 December, followed by the visit to Washington of Chancellor Erhard of West Germany on 20 December. Consequently, the British expected the President to be stressed. This was confirmed by McGeorge Bundy who informed them that as the President was still convalescing the best time for Wilson to talk to the President would be in the morning and early afternoon, 'after that he still gets tired and is not in very good form'.[197] There were also alarming reports of the President's growing volatility. The decision to escalate US involvement in the war had not been an easy one and Johnson was aware that the war might jeopardize his entire presidency, but particularly his plans for the Great Society. According to his advisors, by the summer of 1965 the President was increasingly paranoid and his moods erratic.[198] Johnson, never comfortable with criticism, was reacting angrily to the growing number of opponents of the war, on the political right and left, and to those questioning his actions on the race issue.

If the President's physical and mental state was not already troublesome enough, the preparations for Wilson's visit had yet again further annoyed the President. Bruce noted on 17 November that the President appeared to be in need of further rest. This was the Ambassador's way of saying Johnson was in a bad mood. He also noted that,

> The President was irritated by the request made today by the PM for them to meet on December 17. He said he was tired of Wilson trying to commit him to such meetings through newspaper leaks. I suggested he might ask the PM to come down to the ranch.[199]

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[197] Letter from Patrick Dean to Burke Trend, Cabinet Office, 30 November 1965, PREM 13/6, PRO

[198] Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times 1961-1973* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 281-284

[199] David Bruce diaries, 17 November 1965

The President would rather not have met with the Prime Minister but Bundy advised that 'if Wilson is in the country to address the United Nations, and asks to see you, there really isn't much choice'. At that stage, the plan was to minimise the visit to 'one serious talk at the Ranch, and leave it at that' and that 'the real point of the visit is for you and Wilson to talk'.[200]

Accordingly Michael Stewart told the Prime Minister he was 'making the visit at a time when the President is reported not wholly to have recovered his strength and good humour. You might hit him on a bad day.'[201] Stewart suggested that given the short time the Prime Minister would have with the President there was a 'danger of the Americans generally, and of the President in particular, feeling that, in our own difficulties, we have too little consideration for the present troubles of the United States administration.' Stewart felt, therefore, that in his talks with Johnson it would be advantageous if Wilson paid lip service to the problems of Vietnam and the US budget difficulties.

> If you did this at a fairly early stage it would pave the way to a better reception of our own demands on the United States, which are likely to be considerable, - concrete support ... over Rhodesia, understanding our insistence that we shall have in due course to leave Singapore, a proposal that the Americans should take over the main burden of the defence of Libya and contribute to installations in Australia and a general desire for financial support for sterling.

The press rightly surmised that the main theme for the talks would be the British government's defence review.[202] A 'Defence Week-end' had been held at 10

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200 Memo for the President from McGeorge Bundy, Subject: Visitors, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 215, File: UK, Wilson Visit, 12/17/65, LBJL

201 Michael Stewart to Prime Minister, Your Visit to the US, 10 December 1965, PREM 13/686, PRO

202 Cable from Bruce to Rusk, 16 December 1965, Subject: Press Comment on Defense Aspects of Johnson-Wilson Talks, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VII, Cables 10/65-1/66, LBJL

Downing Street on 13-14 November, after which it was felt it was time for the Prime Minister to have a 'personal discussion' with the US President 'about the global relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States.' It was expected that the Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary would visit early in 1966 to discuss matters in further detail.[203] The Americans, however, also recognised that Rhodesia and Vietnam/Malaysia would also be at the top of Britain's Washington agenda. They also knew it would be necessary to indulge Wilson a little. When planning the 'cast of characters' for the President's working lunch with Wilson, McGeorge Bundy recommended keeping the group small, with just the major players involved - the President, Rusk, Bruce and himself - as this would help 'Wilson's own sense that he is getting businesslike treatment'.[204]

Vietnam continued to cause tension between the two countries. Wilson started his trip to the United States by delivering a speech to the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York. Rusk had told Bruce that 'it was important for the Prime Minister in his speech to the UN on Wednesday of this week not to surprise us by embarrassing references to the Vietnamese war, indeed he would prefer no statement at all by the PM on the subject'.[205] Bruce was uncomfortable with this degree of interference, describing it as 'a somewhat difficult matter to handle', remarking that he was 'not sure if President Johnson were making a speech to the UN he would welcome advice from the British as to what its contents should be'. The Ambassador spoke to Oliver Wright on the matter, who said he would pass

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203 Prime Minister's Visit to the United States and Canada, 15-20 December, 1965. PREM 13/686, PRO; Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 16 December 1965, Subject: Press Comment on Defence Aspects of Johnson-Wilson Talks, NSF, Countries File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VII, Cables, 10/65-1/66, LBJL

204 Memo to Mr. Bill Moyers from McGeorge Bundy, Subject: Cast of Characters for a Wilson working lunch, 13 December 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 215, File: UK, Wilson Visit, 12/17/65, LBJL

205 Bruce diaries, 13 December 1965

the comment on to the Prime Minister.[206] Wright called Bruce the next day to say that the Prime Minister 'would certainly say nothing of an embarrassing nature' about Vietnam in his speech.[207] He was good to his word. Although his speech ranged over the gamut of world problems, the US was most keen to know what he had said on Vietnam and Rhodesia. Ball asked Arthur Goldberg whether Wilson had said anything about the possibility of US bombing of Petrol, Oil and Lubricant stores in Hanoi and Haiphong - he had not, instead giving the US strong support on Vietnam.[208] The speech was memorable for another reason. Due to British reluctance to use force against the Rhodesian Government which had recently issued its Unilateral Declaration of Independence, as soon as Wilson stood to speak, virtually all the African delegates walked out.[209]

In the months leading up to Wilson's visit, the Johnson administration was considering another bombing pause. McGeorge Bundy was trying to persuade the President and Dean Rusk that the domestic and international arguments for a pause were stronger than ever. One of his given reasons was that during talks with Secretary McNamara and Mr. Ball in London on 27 November, Prime Minister Wilson had indicated, without elaborating, that he had 'some new Vietnam gambit up his sleeve', as Bundy put it, and that the plan had a one in ten chance of success.[210] Wilson intended to put it to the President during his December visit. The Americans surmised that the Prime Minister would say that the UK was willing to talk with the

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206 Ibid

207 Ibid, 14 December 1965

208 Telephone Conversation between Ambassador Goldberg and George Ball, 16 December 1965, 12.50 PM, Declassified Documents Series

209 Goldberg estimated about 35 delegations. Wilson thought it was around 20. UDI declared on 11 November 1965.

210 Memo from McGeorge Bundy to the President, 27 November 1965, 12.30 pm in FRUS, 1964-1968, Vol. III,, p. 583; 'Wilson Visit', 12/17.65 NSF, Country File, Europe & USSR, UK, Box 215, File: UK: Wilson Visit, 12/17/65, LBJL

DRV and the Viet Cong if this was attractive to the US. As Bundy argued, 'we will spike his guns and those of everyone else like him if we have a pause in effect at the time of his visit'.[211]

McGeorge Bundy also advised the President that Wilson would be 'very inquisitive about our future plans' in Vietnam, and that the President's frankness on this issue would 'help to keep his flag nailed to our mast'. Given the fact that many of the administration's next decisions had not been finalised, it was also suggested that the President speak to Wilson 'very privately', perhaps during one of their one-on-one talks.[212]

The Prime Minister met the President privately on both 16 and 17 December, and in formal talks with their respective advisers once. They also talked during lunch on 17 December. As Rusk was not back in Washington until 17 December, Vietnam was not discussed in any detail during the first day of talks. Instead, after a private talk of almost one hour, Wilson and Johnson joined their advisers to discuss Rhodesia, nuclear sharing and the British defence review. The Americans pledged to 'reinforce and supplement' British actions on Rhodesia, which included an oil embargo and airlift for Zambia.[213] Wilson expressed his appreciation of American support on this. On the defence review the Prime Minister was more guarded, giving no specific details to the Americans, apart from acknowledging cuts were necessary East of Suez, and that Singapore was the most likely target. He did, however, reaffirm Britain would maintain a world role and said no decision would be made until the Americans had had an opportunity to give their views on the matter. Bruce

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211 Memo for the President from Bundy, 27 November 1965 in FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume III, p. 583

212 Memo for the President from McGeorge Bundy, Subject: The Wilson Visit, 16 December 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 215, File: UK: Wilson Visit, 12/1/7/65, LBJL

213 Notes on President's Meeting with Prime Minister Wilson 17 December 1965, Declassified Documents Series

later noted that Wilson had been 'careful in phrasing his remarks on the defense review to indicate a desire to have our comments while avoiding any commitment that British decisions would conform to our views'.[214]

On the morning of 17 December, the President discussed the visit of Prime Minister Wilson in a meeting with Rusk, McNamara, Ball, Bundy and Jack Valenti. Rusk had just returned from attending the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Paris (14-16 December) and was asked by the President if he had brought back any peace proposals. Rusk answered:

> No. After moving around in NATO, I find Wilson is a paragon of courage. The rest are doing nothing. I really can't see why the British can't put in men to support the Australians.

The President responded bitterly, saying, 'Wilson is going to do nothing. He wants a DSC for fending off his enemies in Parliament'.[215]

When Johnson and Wilson had a brief discussion on Vietnam before lunch that day, the Prime Minister again highlighted his problems back home by showing the President a letter he had had from 68 Labour MPs 'only a few of them traditionally concerned with the Vietnam question'. According to Wilson, Johnson was sympathetic to his difficulties but nevertheless went on to describe his own internal problems.[216] At the lunch that followed, attended by the Prime Minister, the President and Dean Rusk, very little of any consequence was said on Vietnam. All three agreed that the best role for Her Majesty's Government at present 'was to

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214 Visit of Prime Minister Wilson, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VII, Memos, 10/65-1/66, LBJL

215 Notes of a Meeting, 17 December, 1965, in FRUS, 1965-68, Volume III, p. 644

216 Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the President before Luncheon at the White House on Friday, 17 December, 1965, PREM 13/686, PRO

pursue vigorously and by every means the possibility of opening negotiations'.[217] Wilson did raise the issue of an extended bombing pause, which the Americans admitted they were seriously considering, and also indicated that any bombing of Hanoi or Haiphong 'would create the most serious problems for him and his Government in determining what line they would be obliged to adopt'.[218] The Prime Minister also agreed to increase the British contribution to the Asian Development Bank from $10 million to $30 million.[219]

Reactions to December Visit

The Prime Minister felt 'the talks could hardly have been more friendly, more open and more generally satisfactory and the Americans clearly welcomed the opportunity for a frank exchange of views'.[220] He was once more particularly keen to emphasize the warmth of the personal relationships, telling his colleagues about the President and Mrs. Johnson's invitation to join them for the Christmas Tree celebrations on the White House lawn. Wilson thought the visit had been 'eminently successful.' Bruce said that the Prime Minister had 'every right to be pleased' by the visit 'for President Johnson has been favourably impressed by him, and their relationship will be more intimate than heretofore.'[221]

The Americans noted that the Wilson visit:

> marked another step forward in the understanding and mutual

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[217] Record of a Conversation at Lunch at the White House on Friday, 17 December, 1965, PREM 13/686, PRO

[218] Ibid & Visit of Prime Minister Wilson, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VII, Memos, 10/65-1/66, LBJL

[219] Visit of Prime Minister Wilson, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VII, Memos, 10/65-1/66, LBJL

[220] Telegram from Commonwealth Relations Office to Canberra, 24 December 1965, Washington Talks, PREM 13/686, PRO

[221] Bruce diaries, 17 December 1965

> respect between the British Government and our own. The President and Prime Minister were able to understand each other quickly and easily on every issue they discussed, and both governments will now be able to move forward with confidence in a whole series of efforts which are of great concern to both of them.[222]

Wilson ended the year with talk of the 'good atmosphere' created by his visit to Washington still prevalent. Bundy told Dean that 'he thought this general feeling would begin to percolate widely since the President was letting everybody know how pleased he had been with his talks with you and how valuable they were likely to be as a foundation for the future'.[223]

There can be little doubt that part of the reason for the temporary improvement in Anglo-American relations was due to the recent abstention by the British from peace initiatives. The December visit had seen very little discussion or movement on the issue of Vietnam, partly because the British focus had turned to Rhodesia.

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222 Kaiser, 20 December 1965, File: Additional Backup for the Visit of Prime Minister Wilson of the United Kingdom, December 16-17, 1965, The President's Appoint File [Diary Backup] 12/6/65-123/31/65, Box 26, LBJL

223 Letter from Patrick Dean to Prime Minister, 28 December 1965, PREM 13/686, PRO

CHAPTER 5

JANUARY-AUGUST 1966: 'HALF THE WAY WITH LBJ': BRITISH DISSOCIATION

With President Johnson's domestic difficulties mounting week by week, and with a successful outcome to the war in Vietnam proving illusory, Anglo-American relations were never likely to be a priority issue for the Johnson administration in 1966, particularly now that the British government had made clear its decision not to play a military role in Vietnam. But Vietnam remained the Wilson government's major day-to-day domestic political problem. As the war escalated still further, the Prime Minister was faced with the difficult task of attempting to distance himself from the Johnson administration on Vietnam without alienating himself from the President. This would require delicate political footwork, not least because Britain still required American financial help for the pound.

However appreciative of Wilson's diplomatic support on Vietnam during his rational moments, Johnson was furious that Wilson was not absolutely loyal, and therefore compliant, on this all-important issue to his administration. Throughout 1966 the President's gut reaction towards Wilson and the British would challenge his logical understanding of the Prime Minister's domestic political problems. As the war continued to escalate, and appear increasing intractable, so the absence of the British flag in Vietnam became more problematic. And, after Wilson increased his Parliamentary majority in the 1966 General Election, the Johnson administration feared the Labour government might begin to backtrack from the 'understandings' reached in 1965.

Anglo-American Relations - January 1966

On 18 February 1966 Patrick Dean delivered his annual review of the United States for 1965 to the British Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart. Two particular issues stood out now that 'the Johnson stamp' had become clearer.[1] First was the fact that America's European policies had suffered due to the prioritisation of Pacific and Far Eastern affairs; second the fact that Americans viewed any alliance in terms of its usefulness to them had been 'brought out more brutally by President Johnson then [sic] by his predecessor'.[2] Anglo-American relations were characterized as 'close and friendly but essentially business-like.' Although Wilson's visit to Washington in December was described as 'a notable diplomatic success'. Dean stressed that:

> Mr. Johnson, like most Americans, believes that alliances are of little value unless they produce results. We are judged on what we can give to the free world and the stability and prosperity of the United States.[3]

Britain would be judged on its ability to deal with its continuing economic difficulties and any American help in that direction would come at a cost:

> They were not entirely satisfied that enough had been done to modernise the British economy; they were disturbed at elements in our labour situation especially the attitude between management and men. If Americans make economic decisions favourable to us they will have been made with more than half an eye on what we can deliver in return.[4]

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[1] Sir Patrick Dean to Michael Stewart, United States of America: Annual Review for 1965, 18 February 1966, FO371/184995/AU1011/1, PRO

[2] Foreign Office Minute by G.C. Mayhew, Annual Review for 1965, 22 February 1966, FO371/184995/AU1011/1, PRO

[3] Sir Patrick Dean to Michael Stewart, United States of America: Annual Review for 1965, 18 February 1966, FO371/184995/AU1011/1, PRO

[4] Ibid

The only other noteworthy issue during 1965 was, of course, Vietnam. According to Dean:

> British support for the American position in Viet-Nam was warmly acknowledged throughout 1965, though criticism of British shipping in North Viet-Nam ports appeared fairly regularly at the end of the year.[5]

The Johnson administration had indeed continually pressed the British government to deal with the shipping issue. At the end of January 1966, Dean Rusk, Secretary of State, again spoke to Stewart of Congressional 'resentment' of British-registered ships visiting Hanoi and, indeed, said that this affected Congressional understanding of other British problems, including Rhodesia. He believed that if there were to be a vote it would go against the British 3 to 2.[6]

In May 1966 after a Presidential approach on the issue, Wilson replied that the British had done all they could to gets their flag shipping out of North Vietnam, and indeed the problem had been 'almost entirely reduced to Hong Kong registered British flag ships'. The Americans concluded that, 'we do not feel there are any additional persuasive considerations which can be advanced to Wilson at this time'.[7] It was nevertheless a festering sore in Anglo-Americans relations in South East Asia, and contributed to the sense that the British were not being entirely cooperative on Vietnam.

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5 Ibid

6 Record of a Conversation over Lunch between the Foreign Secretary and Mr. Rusk at the State Department, 27 January 1966, PREM 13/1272, PRO

7 Memorandum from Walt W. Rostow to Benjamin H. Read, Subject: North Vietnam Shipping - Prime Minister Wilson's message of May 9 to the President, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Memos 2 of 2, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

Another Bombing Pause

By the end of 1965 US troop deployment had reached 180,000 and the US Air Force had intensified and escalated its bombing program. On 15 December, the US bombed a major industrial target - a thermal power plant in the North and was even bombing Laos in order to curb infiltration of South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh trail.[8] The continued military build-up in South Vietnam added to the charge that the US was still seeking a military solution to the war.

However, in the midst of this escalation the United States had begun a peace offensive. Beginning on 24 December, the United States and the NLF agreed to a 30-hour Christmas truce. As part of this, the US suspended its bombing of North Vietnam. The Johnson administration decided to extend the halt in bombing in order to allow diplomatic exchanges to continue, either directly or indirectly through third parties, and to demonstrate its desire for peace to the growing number of opponents of the war. At the same time, however, ground, air and sea operations in South Vietnam not only resumed but actually increased.

In order to emphasize the seriousness of US endeavours for peace, President Johnson wrote to 113 world capitals to discuss the route to negotiations. This correspondence included a list of 'fourteen points' that contained the elements Washington thought should be included in any settlement. This was, of course, partly aimed at countering the North Vietnamese's 'four points.' As well as the Presidential approach to world leaders, Vice-President Humphrey was sent to Asia to see the leaders of Japan, Korea, Formosa and the Philippines in person, while UN

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[8] Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: The Full Story of US Involvement in Vietnam from Roosevelt to Nixon* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1970), p. 492

Ambassador Goldberg, had conversations with UN Secretary General U Thant, the Pope, General de Gaulle, Italian leaders, and Prime Minister Wilson.[9]

Wilson had however requested the briefing he received from Goldberg, it had not been volunteered.[10] As a result throughout the prolonged bombing pause the United States kept in close touch with London. As part of the peace offensive, President Johnson cabled Harold Wilson on 29 December asking for his advice and for his suggestions about possible British action.[11] After some deliberation, Wilson replied on 31 December. Not only did Wilson encourage the US in its peace efforts, he also offered British services. He suggested to the President that, as well as informing the North Vietnamese about the continued pause through the American Ambassador in Rangoon as the US intended, the British could also approach them through their Consul-General in Hanoi and would also approach the Russians to persuade them of the sincerity of the American desire for peace.[12]

. During the pause the Soviets sent a five-man mission to Hanoi headed by Alexander N. Shelepin, Secretary of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party.[13] Speculation was rife in London and Washington as to the purpose of this visit and to the possibility of talks developing from Shelepin's visit. The British suggested Washington extend the bombing moratorium, at least until Shelepin returned from Hanoi. This was partly because Patrick Dean had informed the Foreign Office that 'some of the President's less sophisticated advisers' were not

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9 *The Times*, 9 February 1966, p. 12; Summary Notes of the 555th Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, 5 January 1966, 'Peace Offensive Regarding Vietnam', FRUS, Vietnam, Vol. IV, 1966, p. 19.

10 Record of Conversation between the Prime Minister and the United States Ambassador at No. 10 Downing Street at 12.10 pm, 10 January 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

11 Telegram from Foreign Office to Patrick Dean, 29 December 1965, Vietnam, PREM 13/1271, PRO

12 Telegram from Prime Minister to President, 31 December 1965, PREM 13/1196, PRO

13 7-12 January 1966

'taking full account of the difficulties which the other side would have even if they wanted to change course'.[14] The British worried Washington would not give peace a chance.

While the Americans may have agreed with the British that it was worth waiting for Shelepin to return home, they were not entirely confident that the British could be trusted with the delicate role of mediation. Rusk, in particular, felt the British were too anxious for peace and indeed told the President that they had to be watched as 'they'd be inclined to give away too much. We don't want to lose cards we need to deal with. We must be clear with [the] Brit[ish]'.[15] This lack of trust in the British as intermediaries became a recurring theme in US attitudes to British peace efforts. On this occasion, the President thought that Wilson ought to understand the situation by now, that is, he should know the British could not speak for the United States without prior authorisation and understood the necessity for secrecy in Moscow or anywhere else.[16]

Although there was some evidence that Hanoi was probing the 'fourteen points', after almost a month without bombing the Johnson administration's patience began to fail.[17] On 24 January the President gave Wilson 'as one of those who have most strongly supported our peace effort' a full picture of American views on the suspension of bombing, informing him that the pause had been successful

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[14]Letter from Tom Bridges, Foreign Office to Malcome Reid, 10 Downing Street, 30 December 1965, PREM 13/1271, PRO

[15] Notes of a Meeting, 3 January 1966 in FRUS, Vol. IV, p. 7

[16] Ibid

[17] During the pause, DRV official representatives met directly with US officials (Rangoon) and communicated officially to a friendly 'neutral' (Vientiane). Washington suspected this move was made in an attempt to prevent a resumption of the bombing. There was also some indication that the North Vietnamse would free captured US airmen. See Memo for Mr. Bundy from Chester L. Cooper, 24 January 1966, Declassified Document Series. Wilson described the Vientiane approach as 'dubious' and despite informing Moscow that the US was prepared for any sort of confidential indication 'that there was in fact any conscious change in the military pace' nothing came from Hanoi.

'everywhere except in Hanoi and Peking'.[18] Worried about the adverse publicity a resumption of bombing would attract, the Prime Minister told the President,

> It is of course of vital importance to the American image in the world, as well as to us and your other friends who will wish to defend your actions, that everything possible should be done to bring home your case to world opinion.

To this end, Wilson suggested making public 'all the evidence you are able to release of the use which the North Vietnamese have made of the bombing pause and the two holiday truces to reinforce their own military and to inflict casualties on American and South Vietnamese troops and civilians'.[19] Johnson listened to this advice as he was well aware that some of America's allies, including Japan, Canada, Poland and Pakistan, were against a resumption of bombing at this time.[20] When bombing began again, the President knew it was crucial to 'hold down statements from other nations' in order to prevent the escalation of domestic and international condemnation of the war.[21] However, Rusk admitted that the Americans were 'a little thin about VC activity on the ground' and that this might 'cause some trouble' when they resumed bombing. The President nevertheless agreed to all diplomatic missions receiving a summary of enemy military activity during the pause. And as one of the United States' 'special friends' Johnson gave Wilson notice on 30 January that bombing was about to be resumed and told the Prime Minister that his firm support of this action

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[18] Telegram from the President to the Prime Minister, 24 January 1966, PREM 13/1196, PRO

[19] Telegram from the Prime Minister to the President, 26 January 1966, PREM 13/1196, PRO

[20] Notes of Meeting, 'Resumption of Bombing', 26 January 1966 in FRUS 1964-68, Vietnam, Vol, IV, 1-31 January 1966, p. 153

[21] Notes of Meeting, 29 January 1966 in FRUS 1964-68, Vol. IV, p. 182

was 'another encouraging proof of the depth of our understanding'.[22] The bombing resumed on 31 January 1966.

British Domestic Politics - Hull by-election to General Election - January-March 1966

The death of Henry Solomons, Labour MP for Hull North on 7 November 1965 reduced the Labour Government's majority to one.[23] Hull North was a highly marginal seat and the by-election that followed centred on the issue of Vietnam. Richard Gott of the Radical Alliance stood against the Labour candidate, Kevin McNamara. Although Labour increased its majority in the Hull North by-election on 27 January from 1,181 to 5,351, the by-election illustrated the growing importance of Vietnam in British domestic politics and highlighted the precariousness of Wilson's hold on power.[24]

The US resumption of bombing in North Vietnam meant as Wilson put it, 'suddenly, the Labour Party was deep in a new crisis over Vietnam'.[25] Much of the outrage was due to a statement issued by Michael Stewart on the day the bombing restarted saying Britain 'understood and supported' the action. This statement had in fact been written by the Foreign Office which, according to Wilson, had been 'falling over itself to get into line' and issued a statement that had not been summitted to him for approval. Despite later arguing that he would 'not have agreed to a statement in those terms,' Wilson had no choice, however, but to tell his critics that the Foreign

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22 Memorandum from Bundy to the President, 22 January 1966 in FRUS, Vol. IV, p. 103; Telegram from the President to the Prime Minister, 30 January 1966, PREM 13/1196, PRO

23 A by-election was also due to be held in Erith, so at the time of Solomons' death, Labour was faced with the prospect of having a majority of 2, 1 or 0 in the coming months.

24 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 199

25 Ibid, p. 204

Secretary had acted with his full authorization and cabinet approval. Privately, Wilson was 'fuming' about it.[26] By now there was growing divergence of views between the upper echelons of the British Foreign Office and 10 Downing Street.

The response to the Government's latest act of diplomatic support for US policy in Vietnam was widespread and vociferous. On the same evening Stewart's statement was issued, 90 Labour MPs signed and sent a telegram condemning the action to William Fulbright, US Senator, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and a growing critic of US policy in Vietnam.[27] No doubt LBJ was infuriated by this action, not least because Fulbright was rapidly becoming the President's bête noire. Until he openly turned against the Vietnam war in the autumn of 1965, the Senator had been a long-time friend of Johnson's. Fearing a confrontation with China or the Soviet Union, and believing the United States could not win where the French had lost, Fulbright was about to begin open Senate hearings on the war: Johnson would never forgive him for this betrayal. The Labour MPs could not have chosen a more telling target; by sending their concerns to Fulbright, they were aware they were fuelling Congressional criticism of the Johnson administration's conduct of the war.

Despite the victory in the Hull by-election, the media reported excitedly on a Labour split over Vietnam.[28] On 2 February Wilson faced these critics at a private meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP).[29] In what Wilson characterized as a 'major storm', he replied for thirty minutes on the subject of Vietnam. As he later

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26 *Benn diaries,* 1 February 1966, p. 381

27 Telegram from Bruce, London to Rusk, 2 February 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Cables, 1/66-7/6, LBJL

28 *The Crossman Diaries*, 1 February 1966, p. 175

29 Telegram from Bruce, London to SecState, Washington, 2 February 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Cables, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

put it when telling Johnson of his actions, 'the Foreign Secretary and I decided to meet the challenge head on whatever the risk'.[30] With a General Election in the offing, the Prime Minister was alarmed that Labour were 'presenting the image of a badly split party.'[31] One 'high placed Labour Government source' leaked the details of this meeting to the Americans and confirmed that the Prime Minister had indeed laid down the law and the 'political facts of life' and was 'in most aggressive, uncompromising, and effective style, completely overwhelming critics'.[32] According to the source, Wilson had let them know that he

> could not continue to govern with this kind of sniping from party dissidents on so central an issue. Moreover, he implied that if dissidents persisted in open opposition, which only gave comfort to Tories and weakened Labor's public credit, his hand might be forced and he would have to consider whether [the] matter should be put to [the] country.[33]

Wilson took particular pleasure in telling the President that he

> got considerable mileage out of [the] point that during the 40 days bombing pause there was not a sound out of them commending the United States administration for the opportunities they had opened up for a peaceful settlement .... What I think was really damaging to the critics was my repeated jibe that none of them during this period had thought fit to send a telegram to Ho Chi Minh demanding now that he should respond in kind, or to demonstrate with 'peace in Vietnam' banners outside the Chinese Embassy. This had the effect of detaching from the lobby all but the irreconcilables ...[34]

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30 Telegram from Prime Minister to President, 9 February 1966, PREM 13/1196, PRo

31 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 267

32 Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 2 February 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Cables, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

33 Ibid

34 From Prime Minister to President, 9 February 1966, PREM 13/1196

This taunt was also repeated on 8 February when Wilson faced a further grilling in Parliament during a lengthy debate on South and Southeast Asia when Wilson also voiced his conviction that President Johnson was sincere in his desire to end the fighting the Vietnam.[35] As Bruce pointed out, the Prime Minister's emphasis on Hanoi's part in the conflict 'did well in ridiculing in advance points dissident Labour MP's' were likely to make.[36] He was also happy to report that as a result of 'the rout' in Parliament, a telegram was duly sent to Ho Chi Minh by some of the same individuals that had earlier sent a telegram to Fulbright. Wilson summed up the 'operation' as a 'total success' but reminded the President that the problem was not likely to go away:

> We have got over a very awkward moment though it shows once again the difficulties I am bound to have from time to time when subject to group pressures with a parliamentary majority so much less than my real present majority in the country.[37]

This emphasis on a small working majority, naturally ever present in the Prime Minister's mind, would soon come back to haunt Wilson in his dealings with the President over Vietnam.

The day after the Prime Minister's meeting with the PLP, 3 February, a meeting of the Cabinet took place which resulted in what Barbara Castle termed 'the most spirited wrangle yet on Vietnam'.[38] Although the Cabinet minutes merely record that the discussion of the Foreign Office statement elicited 'considerable

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35 Cable from Bruce to SecState, Washington, 8 February 1966, NSF, Country File, Europe & USSR, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Cables, 1/66-7/66, Doc. 65 ; Hansard Vol. 724, 1965-66, Feb. 7-18, Col. and Hansard, Vol.724, 1965-66, Feb. 7-18, Col. 252

36 Hansard, 8 February 1966, Col. 36, Vol. 706 & Cable from Bruce, London to SecState, Washington, 8 February 1966, NSF, Country File, Europe & USSR, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Cables, 1/66-7/66, Doc. 65

37 From Prime Minister to President, 9 February 1966, PREM 13/1196, PRO

38 *Barbara Castle diaries*, 3 February 1966, p. 52

disquiet', it is clear this meeting presented Wilson with yet another challenge to his authority. Castle recalls that as well as herself, Richard Crossman, Minister of Housing and Local Government, Frank Cousins, Minister of Technology, and Frederick Lee, Minister of Power, protested at Stewart's statement of support for the renewal of American bombing. Apparently even Wilson's loyal Chief Whip, Edward Short was also 'angry' about it, provoking Stewart to lose his temper with him.[39] Barbara Castle acknowledged that this had been Harold's 'most stormy week over Vietnam' but that he had 'succeeded in allaying some of the bitterness about Michael Stewart's statements' during the Parliamentary Party meeting.[40] However, many in the Cabinet suggested the Government could have dissociated from the resumption of bombing whilst maintaining the official policy of support for American involvement in Vietnam. Wilson and Stewart defended their actions firmly, still maintaining Britain could act best as a mediator by not criticizing the Americans publicly. Indeed they argued it was their

> initiative which had originally persuaded the United States Government to institute a short bombing truce over Christmas and to extend it thereafter for a longer period than they had originally envisaged.[41]

Wilson later repeated this opinion in his memoirs saying the President 'agreed to our demand for the extension'.[42] Although is could be argued that Wilson genuinely misjudged the extent of his influence on LBJ, this exaggeration of the truth was probably a case of retrospective self-aggrandisement by Wilson. The Johnson

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39 *Barbara Castle diaries*, 3 February 1966, p. 52
40 Ibid
41 Cabinet Minutes, 3 February 1966, CAB 128/41, PRO
42 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 205

administration was under pressure from a number of countries to begin, and then continue the bombing pause. However, external pressure was only one factor influencing the Johnson administration's actions. Domestic considerations were much more important. Rusk admitted to the US Ambassador in Vietnam on 28 December that:

> The prospect of large scale reinforcement in men and defense budget increases requires solid preparation of American public. A crucial element will be clear demonstration that we have explored fully every alternative but that [the] aggressor has left us no choice.[43]

He quoted the latest opinion polls which showed that the American people overwhelmingly favoured a renewed effort for a ceasefire and those same people would favour increased bombing if a pause or cease-fire failed to spark the interest of the enemy.[44] He further acknowledged that the Administration had the same problem in Congress. International pressure to institute a bombing pause had been worrying for the US, but it had not been a crucial factor in its decision; dissent at home was a much more urgent factor.

By 9 February Wilson was bemoaning to the President that 'the Foreign Secretary and I have had over the past ten days to face by far the most dangerous attack from within the Parliamentary Party on the question of Vietnam'.[45] The Prime Minister had proved adept at handling this crisis. It proved to be the last one that threatened his Government's existence. On 28 February Wilson announced a General Election for 31 March. Unlike the Hull by-election Vietnam was not an

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[43] Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Vietnam, 28 December 1966, FRUS 1964-68, Vietnam, Vol. III, November-December 1965, p. 717

[44] Ibid. Harris poll showed 73% favored renewed effort for ceasefire and 61% favored increased bombing if pause failed to have any impact.

[45] Telegram from Prime Minister to President, 9 February 1966, PREM 13/1196, PRO

important issue in the General Election campaign and Labour won convincingly, increasing its over-all majority to 97. This had important ramifications for the Prime Minister's relationship with the White House, as Wilson could no longer justify his policy on Vietnam to President Johnson, as he had so often in the past, in terms of a small working majority. It would also mean the chances of an internal rebellion on Vietnam were much greater. Dissenters would now have much more freedom to publicly express their opposition to Wilson's policy on Vietnam. The Prime Minister also knew he would have more freedom to act in relation to the United States. With a comfortable majority, devaluation of the pound would not necessarily threaten the very life of his government.

Yet More Peace Initiatives - Wilson's Visit to Moscow, 21-24 February

On 31 January, the day President Johnson announced the resumption of bombing, he also asked the United Nations Security Council to consider a draft resolution seeking an international conference to end the war in Vietnam and establish peace in South East Asia. Clearly this was part of the propaganda effort to persuade domestic US opinion that despite the end of the pause the Government was still seeking peace by all means possible. It also had the added bonus of helping to assuage British domestic opinion on the same lines.[46] On 1 February the Security Council met to discuss the resolution but North Vietnam rejected any such action.[47]

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[46] Cable from Arthur Goldberg, London to President and SecState, Washington, 5 March 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Cables, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

[47] Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 492

During the pause Wilson had also raised with the Americans the possibility of a new British initiative as Geneva co-chair.[48] After the resumption of bombing the Prime Minister felt it more urgent than ever that he try some new approach during his trip to Moscow, planned for 21-24 February. To this end, he cabled Johnson to say that he would attempt to persuade the Russians to call for the re-convening of the Geneva Conference. He also had another idea. He would try to arrange a meeting between himself and a senior North Vietnamese representative 'who might come from Hanoi for the purpose, but, failing that with their resident representative in Moscow.'[49] If the meeting took place Wilson told Washington he would:

> explain that the United States cannot be expected to accept the four points as they stand that it is useless to suppose that your government will be worn down by any military pressure North Vietnam can exert. I would then try to probe the North Vietnamese about possible ambiguities or loopholes ... in their own proposals and would again offer to transmit any messages or proposals they may have.[50]

Wilson saw two advantages to this approach. Even if it produced no tangible results it would still be 'a further demonstration of our will to peace and determination to try every means' to achieve it. And further, if the North Vietnamese refused to meet with him, Wilson would 'at least be able to tell the Russians, with added force and emphasis, that their co-operation in joint action by the co-chairmen is indispensable if there is to be any progress towards a peaceful settlement'.[51] Johnson replied that he thought Wilson's proposal was a 'good idea' and promised to furnish the Prime

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48 Summary Notes of 555th Meeting of the National Security Council, 5 January 1966, 'Peace Offensive Regarding Vietnam', FRUS, Vol. IV, p. 19

49 Cable from Prime Minister o President, No Date, PREM 13/1196, PRO

50 Ibid

51 Ibid

Minister with the latest communication from Hanoi, although reminding him of 'the great sensitivity of this contact'. The President ended by saying 'your continuous and constant interest gives me strength and I send my thanks and the gratitude of my countrymen'.[52] The President clearly appreciated the Foreign Office statement of support regarding the resumption of the bombing. Wilson sent a further telegram that seems to demonstrate the cordiality of the personal relationship between the President and the Prime Minister at this point. He expressed his thanks

> for the kind words with which you ended your latest message. It is not difficult for me to go on trying, but I do deeply admire your own patient determination to explore every chance of peace in spite of all the sacrifices your forces are making in Vietnam and of the stubborn intransigence of the other side.[53]

In the event Wilson's trip to Moscow proved fruitless on Vietnam. On his return the Prime Minister cabled Johnson to let him know that the British delegation 'made, as expected, absolutely no progress at all'.[54] It appeared the Russians felt they had little room to manoeuvre at this stage as any move on their part to put pressure on Hanoi would be taken advantage of by the 'militant Chinese'.[55] Hanoi did not take Wilson up on the idea of a meeting of senior men, and instead a Minister of State at the Foreign Office, Lord Chalfont, met with the North Vietnamese charge d'affaires for a four hour discussion. The Prime Minister reported to LBJ and to his Cabinet that Chalfont also made no progress.[56] The private nature of this latest peace effort, not reported to his Cabinet or Parliament, indicates the Prime Minister's genuine desire

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52 Cable from the President to the Prime Minister, 14 February 1966, PREM 13/1196, PRO

53 Cable from Prime Minister to President, Secret, 17 February 1966, PREM 13/1196, PRO

54 Cable from Prime Minister to President, No date, PREM 13/1196, PRO; Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 213

55 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 214; Cable from Prime Minister to President, No Date, PREM 13/1196, PRO

56 Cable from the Prime Minister to President, No Date, PREM13/1196; Cabinet Minutes, 24 February 1966, CAB128/41

to be of help in ending the war; he was not only motivated by domestic political considerations.

The End of the Malaysian 'Confrontation'

On 22 February Defence Secretary Denis Healey's review of British defence policy was published. The White Papers outlined sharp cuts in defence expenditure. The aim was to cap the defence budget at £2,000 million for the years 1967-1970 by reducing it by £400 million. This would reduce the percentage of the Britain's gross domestic product spent on defence from 7% to 6%. These economies would be achieved through, amongst other things, the withdrawal of British forces from Aden in 1968 and the cancellation of plans for a British aircraft carrier. American F-111 aircraft would instead provide a shore-based strike force role.[57] Although the Review spoke of the maintenance of a number of worldwide commitments, including a presence East of Suez, it was clear on both sides of the Atlantic that it was only a matter of time before Britain's military responsibilities overseas would be scaled-down even further. In the meantime, President Johnson and Secretary McNamara were adamant that Britain should maintain its presence in the Far East. The Johnson administration also renewed its hopes for a more conspicuous, military role for Britain in Vietnam.

By early 1966 the United States began to realise that if the confrontation in Malaysia ended, Britain would have a substantial number of troops that could be made available for the fight in Vietnam. Consequently, one of Wilson's lines of

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57 *Barbara Castle diaries*, p. 56

defence against a troop commitment would have gone. Late in 1965 Sukarno was overthrown in a coup and replaced as President of Indonesia by Suharto who signed a peace agreement with Malaysia on 11 August 1966. It was apparent throughout the first half of 1966 that the Commonwealth forces were in a commanding military position and that the confrontation would shortly be resolved.[58]

Although the US sensed an opportunity to put pressure on the British to commit more fully to Vietnam, Rusk was worried that the ending of the confrontation in Malaysia might instead signal a complete withdrawal of British forces from the Far East. In January 1966 he voiced his concerns to the British Foreign Secretary while he was in Washington:

> It would be difficult for the United States if the United Kingdom plans for reduction of forces were predicated solely on the ending of confrontration. It would be much better if the assumption were more general, such as a peaceful situation in the Far East.[59]

As far as the British were concerned, a pull-out East of Suez was certainly not imminent at this point but neither was a deeper commitment in Vietnam. Stewart, apparently in answer to a direct question, said 'even if confrontation [in Malaysia] ended, it would be extremely difficult for the United Kingdom to consider sending troops to Viet-Nam'. Rusk then asked if anything could be done in terms of civil aid, pointing out that even Iran had just undertaken responsibility for medical work in one province of Vietnam. He further pointed out that:

> in the United States the tendency was to call the roll and see which of America's allies were in Viet-Nam. The

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[58] Robert Jackson, *The Malayan Emergency: The Commonwealth's War 1948-1966* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 139

[59] Record of a Conversation over Lunch between the Foreign Secretary and Mr. Rusk, the United States Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, State Department, 27 January 1966, PREM 13/1272

> Administration had used our Indonesian preoccupations in our defence, but in view of recent developments in Indonesia which most Americans considered favourable to us, this was wearing thin.[60]

Stewart did not respond to the implied criticism on this occasion.

When the improved situation in Malaysia coincided with Labour's increased majority in the General Election, the US decided to act. In the middle of May one of the President's special assistants on Vietnam, Robert Komer, asked George Thomson, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, if Her Majesty's Government might be able to provide help on the 'civil side' in Vietnam 'from assets [the] UK might otherwise redeploy from Malaysia as a result of [the] easing of Indonesian confrontation policy'. The Americans were interested in civil truck outfits or construction units, specifically requesting 200 trucks.[61] Thomson told Komer he had no idea about their availability but would look into it.[62]

In early June Dean Rusk met Stewart again at a NATO meeting and discussed the United Kingdom's contribution in South East Asia more fully. He repeated his earlier observation, speaking of 'the great difficulty that would be caused for the Administration if the ending of confrontation resulted in large withdrawals of British manpower from Malaysia without any compensating contribution to the stability of South East Asia.'[63] Recognising that the British government faced severe political constraints on Vietnam, Rusk tried a different tack, suggesting the British had no Parliamentary commitments in respect of Thailand, and asked Stewart to give 'very

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60 Ibid

61 Foreign Office Minute, 'End of Confrontation: Military Assistance to the United States,' 8 June 1966, PREM 13/1890, PRO

62 Telegram from British Embassy, Washington to Foreign Office, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Cables, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

63 Telegram from Brussels to Foreign Office, 6 June 1965, PREM 13/1890, PRO

serious consideration' to helping the military there. The Thais had asked the Americans for about 12 helicopters to help with the counterinsurgency in the north-east.[64] The Foreign Secretary said he would think over the request but admitted that 'it would certainly cause Parliamentary difficulty ... and moreover there was the financial aspect to be considered'.[65] The British government would have to think carefully about these latest propositions, especially in light of the latest defence review.

Arms Sales

With two American requests for material assistance already on the table – one for civil truck units for use in Vietnam, the other for military helicopters for use in Thailand - and with the Prime Minister due to meet Rusk on 10 June, the British Foreign Office urgently considered the best response.

On 17 May, under intense Parliamentary pressure over Britain's Vietnam policy, Wilson had affirmed in the House of Commons that the British government 'was not supplying arms directly or indirectly for the fighting in Vietnam'.[66] Wilson had based this policy on the British position as Co-Chair of the Geneva Conference, although he was keen to emphasise that the Soviets had no such compunction as Co-Chair and were 'supplying arms on a very considerable scale for use in Vietnam'.[67]

Despite British claims of the moral highground, we now know that the British

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[64] Ibid

[65] Ibid

[66] Hansard, Vol. 728, 17 May 1966, Oral Answers, Col. 1119

[67] Ibid. It is also striking how British exports to the US of pesticides and plantkillers saw a 275% increased during the years 1964 and 1967; chemical products saw an increase of 310% and bombs, grenades, guided weapons and ammunitions rose by 560%. US Chamber of Commerce figures.

government had considered selling weapons to the US Navy for use in Vietnam. According to a June 1965 memo of conversation between Secretary of State, Dean Rusk and the British Ambassador, Sir Patrick Dean,

> The British Ambassador said that the UK had received a request through Navy channels for certain bombs to be used in Vietnam. The UK was naturally only too happy to sell the bombs but preferred that in the future it not be said that they were to be used in Vietnam. [68]

While it is not clear whether these weapons were actually supplied or not, Healey later stated in Parliament that the British had turned down an American request for arms during this period. Nevertheless the intent to do so was there, as long as it could be done in secrecy.

The supply of trucks alone was a complicated matter that would require the British Government to engage in yet another balancing act. As a major ally it was policy to sell military equipment to the United States. It had, however, been viewed as too sensitive to admit to selling arms for the war in Vietnam, thus the Prime Minister's statement on 17 May. Consequently, to send trucks to Vietnam would be to go against this statement. The Foreign Office acknowledged that in terms of 'political considerations' to send truck units to Vietnam would be in effect to send troops there and would therefore also be 'contrary to H.M.G.'s policy'. Moreover it could be the thin end of the wedge.

> If truck units went to Vietnam we might soon be faced with the request for armed troops to guard them; and in any case we could not ensure that they would be used for purely civilian purposes.[69]

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[68] Memo of Conversation between Patrick Dean and Dean Rusk, 22 June 1965, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 208, File: UK, Vol. VI, Memos 2 of 2, 7/65-9/65, LBJL

[69] Foreign Office Minute, 'End of Confrontation: Military Assistance to the United States,' 8 June 1966, PREM 13/1890

The Foreign Office also questioned the advantage the Americans 'would gain by introducing new-type vehicles into Vietnam, with all the attendant difficulties of maintenance and spare parts'. One Foreign Office diplomat acknowledged the truth of the matter, in a hand-written comment, 'they want to be able to say we are helping.'[70] The symbolic help such a commitment would have given was ultimately much more important than the practical help it would have provided.

The request for helicopters was even more difficult. Indeed, this would have been a 'new departure, contrary to our policy of avoiding further military commitments on the Asian mainland', while also running foul of the defence review's proposal to reduce costs. Unlike South Vietnam, which was only a protocol member of SEATO, Thailand was a full member. British army engineers were already there building a military airfield, in line with existing SEATO commitments. But as the Foreign Office acknowledged, 'to station an operational unit in Thailand for active counter-insurgency tasks is a very different matter from supplying engineer units for a SEATO constructional task which is almost completed'. This would be a military, combatant role that would be unacceptable politically to the British government.

The Prime Minister discussed this request with Rusk during a meeting in London on 10 June. The Secretary of State repeated his request for help in Thailand expressing his hope that 'H.M.G. could … draw some distinction between military aid for Vietnam and for Thailand'.[71] Instead of refusing immediately, the Prime

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[70] Ibid

[71] Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the US Secretary of State at 10.00 am at 10 Downing Street on Friday, 10 June 1966, PREM 13/1890

Minister detailed the nature of his domestic political problems over Vietnam, and also explained that the opposition to US policy on Vietnam had now been,

> compounded by growing Parliamentary and political opposition to the whole of Britain's East of Suez policy. This was essentially an unnatural alliance between those who held extreme left-wing or pacifist views and others who wished Britain to centre all her efforts in Europe.

He further explained that,

> though unnatural, this alliance was potentially dangerous, more particularly since its general approach was supported by sophisticated economists who argued that we could not afford an East of Suez policy. We could not ignore the danger that giving what would inevitably be very marginal help to Thailand to deal with the bandits would strengthen this movement of opposition (which included a number of people who were increasingly taking a strongly anti-American line as well) and thereby merely create more difficulties for H.M.G.'s policy of support for the United States in Vietnam.[72]

Wilson had already begun to signal to the Americans the likelihood that due to domestic pressure, rather than his own predilections, he might soon be forced to reconsider his position on the British presence East of Suez.

Denis Healey, also at the meeting, was more blunt. He suggested that Britain's 'difficulties resulted from the underlying motive for the American request', which was 'to commit H.M.G. publicly to a military presence further north within SEATO than hitherto'. This wish was 'politically very delicate in Britain'. Rusk asked if the British people knew that Britain already had troops in Thailand, to which Healey replied they did not. Moreover, he believed there would

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[72] Ibid

> be real opposition to what Mr. Rusk was proposing, or indeed to anything like a further Thomson-type mission to Vietnam. We could get away with what was on the ground now; any addition would multiply our difficulties.

In any case, Healey explained Britain was actually 'very short' of helicopters and crews, and these were last kind of equipment they would wish to release for American use.[73]

The British record of this meeting also reveals a debate over whether the problem in Thailand was a legitimate issue for SEATO. If it was an internal security matter, a view Healey espoused, then it was not covered under the Manila Pact; if it was an external problem, as Rusk believed, then it was covered by the SEATO agreement. A debate ensued on the part SEATO played in international politics, with Wilson arguing that it 'certainly existed, but surely it was not at the centre of any of our policies'. The US had, of course, used its commitments under the SEATO Treaty as legal justification for its involvement in Vietnam and, therefore, the alliance was a more salient topic in the United States than in Great Britain. Healey, probably reflecting Wilson's views as well, had let slip his belief that the Vietnamese problem was a civil war and was not likely to be won by the Americans.[74]

After the meeting, the Prime Minister cabled the President, saying the talk with Rusk had been useful and that he wished 'we could help you with a few helicopters in Thailand' and that he would 'look carefully at this'.[75] The British had no intention of being sucked into the Vietnam war via a military commitment to Thailand and it was decided that Stewart should inform the SEATO meeting in

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73 Ibid

74 Ibid

75 Cable from Prime Minister to President, 10 June 1966, PREM 13/1808

Canberra, 27-29 June, that the British Government could not undertake any force commitment specifically to counter Communist subversion in Thailand.[76]

Denis Healey further confused the issue of arms sales by making a statement in the House on 23 June 1966 in which he attempted to refute newspaper allegations that Britain had agreed to supply British bombs and other weapons without imposing restrictions about their use in Vietnam. He said 'the reports are totally inaccurate, and Her Majesty's Government have no intention of acceding to any such request'. When pressed on the nature of the requests made by the United States, he informed Parliament that,

> a request for certain airborne weapons was received from the United States a year ago, and we were unable to accept it. A further request was received some weeks ago. We are considering it, but we are satisfied we shall be unable to accept that, either.

Leader of the Opposition, Edward Heath asked if the reason for the negative reply to these requests were 'reasons of production, or because the weapons will be used in Vietnam'.[77] Healey admitted 'we shall be unable to meet it for reasons of production'. After cries of 'Ah' were heard in the House, Healey went on to say 'But, in any case, after looking into the matter … we are satisfied that it would not have been proper to meet this request'.[78]

To ease parliamentary pressures, Healey even considered seeking Cabinet approval for a Government statement barring the sale of lethal weapons which might be used in Vietnam.[79] The Americans were extremely unhappy with these public

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[76] Hansard, Vol. 730, 23 June 1966, Col. No 922
[77] Ibid
[78] Ibid
[79] Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 25 June 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. III, Cables 1/66-7/66, LBJL

statements, and did not see Healey's proposal as much of an improvement, firmly believing the United Kingdom, as a major ally of the United States, should assert its willingness to sell arms to them 'without restriction as to end use'.[80] Washington, and the President in particular, also viewed British prevarication as further evidence of the British distancing themselves from US policy on Vietnam. Bruce advised Washington 'if the US wants the British to repudiate Wilson's and Healey's prior statements ... the only chance of taking this up successfully would be at the personal level between the President and Prime Minister'.[81] However, the Ambassador recognised that if Washington took this line it would be 'posing Wilson with a most sensitive domestic political problem' and that 'if the President does communicate with [the] Prime Minister he may wish to consider proposing that [the] British take [a] position that they are willing to restrict arms sales for use Viet Nam if Soviet do likewise'.[82]

Before this issue was resolved the US bombed oil installations near Hanoi and Haiphong and priorities changed. Healey did, however, try to clarify the British Government's position in a written answer on 30 June, when he said:

> Her Majesty's Government draw a distinction between the intentional supply of arms to Vietnam via a third country, which we would not allow, and the general supply of arms to allies, on which we do not normally place any restrictions. As I indicated in the House on 23rd June, Her Majesty's Government can and does ensure that arms exports are restricted, both by type and destination, to those which cannot be used in violation of its policies.[83]

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80 David Bruce to Secretary of State, Washington, 25 June 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. III, Cables, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

81 Ibid

82 Ibid

83 Hansard, 30 June 1966, Vol. 730, Col. No. 324

The Americans were still far from impressed by this apparent arms embargo, describing Healey's comments as a 'serious error'.[84] However, after the Hanoi-Haiphong bombing, Bruce admitted to Washington that the issue of Vietnam was becoming 'so acute' for the British Government that the chances of getting a 'substantially improved HMG statement on arms policy' was 'becoming more remote'.[85] Despite some additional Parliamentary statements that attempted 'to make amends' as Walt Rostow put it, the arms sales issue cast a long shadow over US perceptions of Britain's trustworthiness as an ally.[86]

'Half the Way with LBJ': British Dissociation from the Bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong on 29 June

In the weeks leading up to the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong the British and the Americans engaged in a protracted debate about the efficacy of such action. Much of this debate took place, by telegram, between the Prime Minister and the President.

On 2 June 1966, General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff told General William Westmoreland, Commander of the US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, that it was time to take a decision on expanding the air campaign against North Vietnam.[87] For the previous six months Washington had

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[84] Memo to the President from Walt Rostow, 14 July 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, File: UK, Vol. VIII, Memos 1 of 2, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

[85] Telegram from Bruce to Rusk 1 July 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Cables, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

[86] Memo to the President from Walt Rostow, 14 July 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, File: UK, Vol. VIII, Memos 1 of 2, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

[87] Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 494

been seriously considering targeting two oil installations near Hanoi and Haiphong.

In a cable to Wilson sent on 27 May 1966 the President explained,

> I am coming to believe it is essential that we reduce their oil supply in light of the radical increase in the flow of men and material by truck to South Vietnam. For me the calculus is, simply, whether they shall have less oil or I shall have more casualties. But I am determined that their civilian casualties be low and minimal.[88]

Well before this, at their Washington meeting the previous December, the Prime Minister had warned the United States that Britain would have no choice but to dissociate from any bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, and on his return to London had told the House of Commons that the Government had 'always made it clear that there are some escalations of the bombing which we could not support, including bombing of the major cities of North Vietnam'.[89]

Colonel Rogers, a US army officer was sent to London by Secretary McNamara on 2 June to brief the Prime Minister and British Foreign Secretary on US plans to bomb Petrol, Oil and Lubricant (POL) storage installations near Hanoi and Haiphong. The Prime Minister cabled the President the next day with his response to the briefing. Although sympathetic to the President's 'dilemma' over this decision, and aware of the great efforts to ensure civilian casualties would be low, Wilson reiterated his view that,

> as seen from here, the possible military benefits that may result from this bombing do not appear to outweigh the political disadvantages that would seem the inevitable consequence. If you and the South Vietnamese Government were conducting a declared war on a conventional pattern ... this operation would clearly be

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88 Telegram from the President to the Prime Minister 27 May 1966, PREM 13/1808

89 Telegram from Bruce to Ball, Washington, 11 July 1966, NSF, Files of Walt Rostow, 'Wilson Visit', Box 12, LBJL

> necessary and right. But since you have made it so abundantly clear - and you know how much we have welcomed and support this - that your purpose is to achieve a negotiated settlement, and that you are not striving for total military victory in the field, I remain convinced that the bombing of these targets, without producing decisive military advantage, may only increase the difficulty of reaching an eventual settlement.

He then repeated his own intentions in this matter.

> The last thing I wish is to add to your difficulties, but … if this action is taken we shall have to dissociate ourselves from it, and in doing so I should have to say that you had given me advance warning and that I had made my position clear to you…. Nevertheless I want to repeat ... that our reservations about this operation will not affect our continuing support for your policy over Vietnam.[90]

The decision to order the bombings was delayed, in part, because the Americans wanted time to convince their closest ally not to dissociate from this action.[91] Rusk arranged to see Wilson in London and informed Washington that he would do his best to encourage the Prime Minister to rethink his decision.[92] In the event, the meeting on the morning of 10 June lasted only fifteen minutes and as previously noted mainly consisted of a discussion on British military assistance in Vietnam. Rusk was faced with a Prime Minister who had obviously made his mind up on proposed POL bombings and the Secretary of State soon realised his task was now damage limitation. To this end, he told the Prime Minister that the President approved of, and indeed hoped Wilson would say he had been consulted on US intentions prior to the bombing. However, he also hoped that the British would re-affirm their belief that Hanoi was the stumbling block over negotiations. The Prime

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90 Telegram from the Prime Minister to the President, 3 June 1966, PREM 13/1808, PRO

91 Telegram from Rusk to White House, 7 June 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Memos 1 of 2, 1/66/-7/66, LBJL

92 Ibid

Minister and the Foreign Secretary examined their draft statement which would be issued in the event of POL bombings and decided 'the point was adequately covered.'[93]

Wilson did, however, elaborate on the rationale behind his deep concern over the planned escalation in bombing. He argued that bombing Hanoi and Haiphong would further jeopardize the chances of re-convening the Geneva conference on either Cambodia or Vietnam, especially as there had recently been evidence that the Russians were keen to have further talks with him on Vietnam. Rusk appeared to be extremely interested in these latest developments and agreed that Wilson should discuss his ideas with President Johnson before visiting Moscow again. Yet again Rusk encouraged Wilson to believe the US was exhaustively exploring every peace hope, thus indulging Wilson's belief that the US believed in Britain's 'private' peace initiatives.

Although Rusk explained to Wilson that the decision to bomb had not been finalised, the Prime Minister came away from their meeting feeling it was 'virtually inevitable'.[94] British approval was desirable, but ultimately the military and civilian strategists in Washington were prepared to go ahead without it. Nevertheless, a series of terse exchanges between the President and the Prime Minister began the same day. Wilson and Stewart were puzzled over the apparent inconsistencies in the American position. If Washington 'thought there was some chance of the Russians proving responsive to ideas of this kind' the decision to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong was 'even more incomprehensible'.[95] Privately the Prime Minister believed the

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93 Letter from A.M. Palliser to C. M. Maclehose, Foreign Office, 10 June 1966, PREM 13/1083

94 Ibid

95 Ibid

bombing decision 'was now necessary if only for domestic reasons in the United States'. Still, he cabled Johnson to point out the effect of the disastrous decision to bomb on any prospects for reconvening the Geneva conference. 'I don't see how this can fail to affect the prospects of reconvening a Cambodia conference or of suggesting a meeting at Geneva for those who wish to come.'[96]

At the same time as consultations over the POL bombings got under way, Wilson raised the prospect of another visit to Washington. The Prime Minister told Bruce on 2 June that there were a number of things he would like to discuss with the President and it had been six months since their last meeting. Perhaps sensing Presidential sensitivities over his visits, he assured the American Ambassador that 'part of one day' would be sufficient.[97] Although Bruce thought Wilson would not 'go along' with the bombing 'affair', he still felt 'the pros of a meeting, so obviously desired by him outweighed the cons' and therefore recommended the President see him because 'in other policies of vital interest to us, I think he will be steadfast, and would be encouraged by direct contact with you'.[98] It was proposed that the meeting be unofficial as this would 'be conducive to an informal atmosphere.'[99]

Bruce explained to Johnson that he and Wilson felt the problem of a meeting was its timing: a visit shortly before the bombing 'might be construed as a last minute plea' for Johnson to abandon the plan; if it took place just after it 'might be interpreted in Britain as representing a summons from you to rake him over the coals for not having supported you in this respect'.[100] At their meeting on 10 June, Dean

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96 Personal Telegram from Prime Minister to President, 10 June 1966, PREM 13/1808, PRO

97 Telegram from Rusk to White House, 2 June 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Cables, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

98 Ibid

99 Ibid

100 Ibid

informed Wilson that Johnson had agreed that another visit would be useful. Later that day the Prime Minister cabled the President to elaborate on his ideas regarding the date of a visit. He said that he would prefer the visit to take place before he went to Moscow (a visit planned for July 9-10) 'so that I am fully up to date on your thinking when I talk to the Russians' but recognised that this might not be possible, in which case he could visit after his return from Moscow 'and would at least be able to give you a first hand account of their view'. On the issue of the POL bombing, Wilson argued he was sure :

> it is right for us not to meet too near the bombing. I should not wish to come before it. It would be a political mistake for both of us if people could say that I was making a trans-atlantic dash, with my shirt-tails flying, to put pressure on you.[101]

Wilson then admitted the reason for his gentle pressure on the issue of a visit. He said he wanted to announce it publicly because

> I have a tricky Parliamentary Party meeting on June 15 (though it is causing me no loss of sleep) and I think there is some slight advantage in letting it be known that we are to meet before rather than after this, simply because an announcement after may get a bit close to your own d-day.

At this stage Wilson was prepared merely to announce that they had agreed, in light of the Prime Minister's 'useful talk' with Dean Rusk, to have a further brief meeting, as they did at fairly regular intervals and that this would probably take place at the end of June or early in July.[102] What is remarkable about this cable is Wilson's continuing disregard for Johnson's strong resentment about being continually used to

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101 Telegram from the Prime Minister to the President, 10 June 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO
102 Ibid

deal with Wilson's domestic problems. The President's suspicions on this count were compounded by the lack of a specific agenda for such a meeting.

On 14 June Johnson tried the personal approach with Wilson over the British plan to dissociate. He cabled the Prime Minister expressing his deep hope that Wilson could 'find a way to maintain solidarity' with the US, asking him to 'give further thoughts' to British 'interests and commitments in Southeast Asia under the SEATO Treaty'. The President's patience was obviously stretched on this point:

> Dean tells me that, in his talk with you and your colleagues, several references were made to the 'revival [of] SEATO.' South Viet Nam and five signatories of SEATO are not talking about a revival but are committing troops to repel an armed attack from the north.

He also let it be know that he now considered Britain's Co-Chairmanship of the Geneva Conference a convenient fig-leaf behind which to hide:

> Nor do I believe that your role as co-chairman means that Britain should stand aside; the other co-chairman is furnishing large quantities of sophisticated arms and other assistance to North Viet-Nam and is, therefore, an active partner in the effort to take over South Viet Nam by force.[103]

Recognising that his personal plea would probably be in vain, Johnson then virtually dictated Wilson's dissociation statement:

> Quite frankly, I earnestly hope that you will not find it necessary to speak in terms of dissociation. But it would be important to us if you could include the following elements:
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> 1. You were informed of the possibility that such an action would, in our minds, become necessary.

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[103] Personal Cable to the Prime Minister from the President, 14 June 1966, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 12, File: Wilson Visit, Doc. 21d

2. You expressed your own views to us in accordance with statements which you have already made in the House of Commons.

3. The particular step taken by U.S. forces was directed specifically to POL storage and not against civilian centers or installations.

4. Since Britain does not have troops engaged in the fighting, it is not easy or appropriate for Britain to determine the particular military action which may be necessary under different circumstances.

5. It is a great pity that Hanoi and Peiping have been so unresponsive to unprecedented efforts by the U.S. and others to bring this problem from the battlefield to the conference table.

6. Britain is satisfied that U.S. forces have no designs against civilian populations and are taking every possible precaution to avoid civilian casualties.

7. Britain as a member of SEATO fully understands and supports the determination of its fellow SEATO members to insure the safety and the self-determination of South Viet Nam.

I would hope that you could in this context affirm your support for the effort in Viet Nam and your understanding that it is Hanoi which is blocking the path to peace.[104]

The President also wrote that the timing of Wilson's visit to Washington was 'somewhat complicated'. He agreed that there should be 'a good deal of blue sky' between the visit and POL bombings and therefore felt any time in June was no good. Early July was also problematical as their respective calendars were pretty full. He therefore suggested mid or late July if the Prime Minister felt a talk at that time 'essential'. Precise dates for the visit would be left 'open for further determination'.[105] Again, the suggestion was that if Wilson did not comply with Johnson's wishes regarding the statement, a visit to Washington might not happen at all.

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[104] Ibid
[105] Ibid

Not surprisingly the President's cable worried London. Stewart sought Patrick Dean's advice on the President's reply, protesting the cable was 'disappointing in terms both of timetable and of substance'. He found the President's emphasis on military action in relation to the POL bombings, without any mention of possible peace explorations with the Russians, and his comments on SEATO, particularly 'discouraging'.[106] However, the Foreign Secretary advised Dean that although HMG would have to dissociate 'we should not have too much difficulty in incorporating most of the elements mentioned by the President' in the dissociation statement, except for point 7. This point, *linking* Vietnam to SEATO, would cause 'considerable difficulty' for Britain as it was not 'either in the interests of SEATO itself, or politically feasible for H.M.G.'. Regarding the timing of Wilson's visit to Washington it was noted that the tone of the President's reply made a meeting in mid July 'all the more desirable' and indeed the 'Prime Minister would prefer to visit Washington to clear the air fully with the President, before going to Moscow'.[107]

Patrick Dean agreed with Stewart's summation, admitting that 'apart from its content' he also found the tone 'quite disturbing'

> in its emphasis on military action, the possible implied link between satisfying the President's wish for public support and his agreement to a Washington visit, and his apparent lack of interest in the Moscow visit, seems to indicate an unusually difficult frame of mind. This, unfortunately incalculable, consideration is perhaps the most important factor against which the desirability of a visit in mid-July should be measured.[108]

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106 Telegram from Michael Stewart to Patrick Dean, 14 June 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

107 Ibid

108 Telegram from Patrick Dean to Michael Stewart, 15 June 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

Dean was probably well aware of the rumours circulating around Washington about Johnson's state of mind. From early 1965 reports emerged from the White House of the President's increasing paranoia regarding anything to do with the war. By the middle of 1966 the President's moods were increasingly unpredictable. As more and more people questioned his policy in Vietnam, including Robert McNamara – who was now privately expressing his view that a military solution was impossible - the more Johnson 'hunkered down'. LBJ felt a growing sense of frustration as he led his country into a deepening conflict in the knowledge that there was no immediate military or political solution in sight. He was tormented by the loss of life, regularly quoting the number of American 'boys' lost each day. Moreover, the war on poverty and the Great Society programmes were being damaged by the spiralling costs of the war. Congressional critics of the war though still relatively small in number, were becoming increasing vociferous, especially Senators Mike Mansfield and William J. Fulbright. The anti-war movement intensified its activities with sit-ins, mass marches and teach-ins now commonplace. The chant of 'hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?' could be heard outside the White House. By the beginning of June public opinion polls revealed that 37% of the American public disapproved of the job the President was doing in Vietnam, with 41% approving. The sentiment in the country appeared to be either win the war by escalating it or withdraw from it. By the end of June more people disapproved of the President's handling of the war, 42% than approved 40%.[109]

Johnson's image of his own Presidency was crumbling before his eyes. Instead of rethinking the limited war strategy, in light of the lack of

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109 Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 364-6

military progress and the growing domestic and international criticism of US involvement, he increased his determination to plough on with the bombing and the war in general. Consequently 1966 saw a marked hardening of the President's attitude, accompanied by an increasing bloody-mindedness towards critics and allies – especially ones who failed to toe every inch of the US line - alike. By and large, his advisors fell into line with this tougher attitude. As Robert Dallek put it, by the middle of 1966

> The war now so enraged Johnson, Humphrey, and most other foreign and defence policy makers in the administration that they could no longer respond unemotionally to criticism of their actions … they had come too far to turn back …. There was a quality of illusion to everything they said and planned for Vietnam.[110]

All this may explain why the British Ambassador in Washington asked HMG to reconsider its stance on SEATO in light of Johnson's own domestic considerations.

> The SEATO point is one on which, I must underline, the administration has become deeply committed in public not least in relation to its attempt to maintain support in Congress.... This is strongly reflected in the President's sour remark about 'not talking about a revival of SEATO'. This is of course for the Americans not a legalistic point, but goes to the very heart of the notion of collective security and their approach to Asian defence, which they see as being in our interests to share.[111]

As a compromise, Dean wondered if it would be possible 'to go some way to meet the President's seventh point, which merely asks us to understand and support the determination of our fellow SEATO members, by reaffirming previous statements

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110 Ibid, p. 356

111 Telegram from Patrick Dean to Michael Stewart, 15 June 1965, PREM 13/1083, PRO

about Viet Nam made in the context of SEATO'. He acknowledged, however, that he could not be sure if this would satisfy the President.[112]

Dean was equally concerned over the matter of another visit by the Prime Minister to Washington.

> I cannot escape the impression that the President is trying to meet the Prime Minister's wish for an early announcement while in fact leaving himself free to call the visit off later on, on some pretext or other. This would be entirely consistent with his general policy of keeping himself uncommitted for as long as possible to specific engagements. In other words he would like to wait and see what the position is in general following the bombing. He cannot now foresee what complications and difficulties there might be and hence cannot decide at this stage whether a visit by the Prime Minister would be in his interests or an added embarrassment.[113]

Three factors might influence LBJ's decision. Firstly, whether or not Wilson announced a visit to Moscow after the bombing. Secondly, the Prime Minister's actual reaction to the bombing. And thirdly, how Congressional and public opinion shaped up in response to the Prime Minister's position on the bombing.[114] The Ambassador therefore advised the the Prime Minister to postpone any announcement of a possible visit to allow 'time for further considered exchanges with the President leading, I would hope, to amicable agreement.[115]

Before replying to the President, Stewart, on Wilson's suggestion, arranged to meet with the American Ambassador, David Bruce for further guidance.[116] Bruce felt the Prime Minister 'should not be put off by the apparently chilly phrase 'if you

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[112] Ibid
[113] Ibid
[114] Ibid
[115] Ibid
[116] Letter from Murray to A.M. Palliser, 10 Downing Street, 15 June 1966, PREM 13/1083

think it essential'' and should therefore go ahead with the visit in mid to late July. He thought it particularly important that the personal relationship 'should be kept up by means of a further visit'.[117] He was also 'emphatic' that, once arranged, the President would not cancel the meeting but advised 'very strongly against making an announcement before its terms and date had been cleared with the President.' He apparently volunteered that the British 'should not repeat that all the time the Prime Minister required would be a working lunch. It was just possible that this idea might be taken literally'.[118] He advised not commenting on the content of Johnson's message.

Wilson listened to this advice and responded to President's cable the next day, merely saying that he was grateful for Johnson's frankness, acknowledging 'each of us now fully understand the others position about the bombing of the oil installations'.[119] He did, however, note that the recent exchange had convinced him of the need for a short meeting and accepted the President's suggestion that they meet in mid or late July. As he suspected the bombing would start shortly, Wilson pressed for an announcement as soon as possible. Unusually for Johnson, who rarely put his thoughts down on paper, he scribbled his response to Wilson's acceptance of his suggested dates on the cable. He wrote, for Walt Rostow's reading, 'if Rusk and you think necessary'.[120] This was yet another clear indication of LBJ's indifference to the British; he had no real agenda to confer with Wilson or help with his domestic difficulties.

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117 Ibid

118 Ibid

119 Telegram from Prime Minister Wilson to the President, 15 June 1966, NSF, Files of Walt Rostow, 'Wilson Visit', Box 12, LBJL

120 Ibid

An earlier draft of Wilson's message perhaps reveals Wilson's real thoughts on this issue. In this version the tone and content was much more forceful and assertive, particularly on the issue of British support on Vietnam, and on the role of SEATO.[121] Wilson acknowledged to Johnson that his problems on Vietnam must seem 'relatively minor ... compared with its all-pervading importance in your own case.' However, referring to that morning's confrontation with the PLP he pointed out that 'the whole complex of Far Eastern defence problems is becoming increasingly difficult here. My concern is not to do anything which will reinforce the unnatural alliance, small in size but covering the whole spectrum of the Party, which we have for the time being totally deflated.' The Prime Minister also attempted to assert some independence on the issue:

> You point out in your message - and indeed ask us to admit publicly – that the fact of our not being militarily involved makes it difficult for us to comment authoritatively on the required military action. I know you will not mind my saying - and indeed to say this to someone of your immense political experience is almost an impertinence - that we must equally be the best judges of what is politically feasible for the Government if we are to maintain (as I am determined to do) our support for you in Vietnam and our continued military involvement in South East Asia.

This unsent version of Wilson's reply also commented on the issue of the SEATO request:

> Of course we accept our obligations under the SEATO Treaty [including the obligation for consultation under paragraph 2 of Article IV]. But these kinds of Treaty obligations cannot be isolated from the political context affecting them. As I said before, I believe that the relatively marginal military support you are asking us for here would threaten the policies I have

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[121] Draft Message from the Prime Minister to the President, 15 June 1966, PREM 13/1083

referred to above.[122]

The Prime Minister's anger at being dictated to by the President was evident in the unsent message. Wilson's decision to send instead a brief, dispassionate reply was therefore something of a triumph for the British and American Embassies and the Foreign Office as they struggled to contain the emerging crisis over 'dissociation' which continued over the following weeks.

In the weeks leading up to the POL bombing, despite the clarity of Wilson's position, the White House – more specifically Walt Rostow - continued to put pressure on the British not to dissociate. While Patrick Dean was out of Washington on a visit to the North West, J.E. Killick deputised at the British Embassy and engaged in a series of exchanges with Murray Maclehose, a Foreign Office adviser in Downing Street. Despite Wilson's reply, Killick remained concerned about the President's message of 14 June.[123] He puzzled over the implications of the 'SEATO ploy', wondering if it was

> a serious attempt to put the Prime Minister on the spot (and if so, whether it presages an attempt to get British troops into Vietnam - which we rather doubt - or simply to hold the line on moral support from a vital SEATO ally in the suspicion that we are keen to write off SEATO – which is best guess), or whether it is no more than an attempt to pull out all the stops, which will have no particularly serious effect on relations between the two if it does not succeed.[124]

The following day, 17 June, Killick talked to Walt Rostow on the telephone and gained further insight into the extent and nature of the President's displeasure.

Rostow said that Rusk and he had had to work very hard on

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[122] Ibid

[123] Letter from J.E. Killick to C.M. Maclehose, 16 June 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

[124] Ibid

the President to prevent the message of 14 June from being 'something really bad'. He was afraid that it was not fully appreciated in London that the President's state of mind was one of absolute determination to see Viet Nam through, come hell or high water. The Americans were being knocked 'from hell to breakfast' on the ground over something which the President and Rusk saw in absolutely clear-cut terms as a matter involving SEATO no less than the Geneva Accord. The Asian Allies were all with the United States, the Europeans were not, and the President no longer attached any real importance to the co-chairmanship point in the case of the United Kingdom.[125]

Again, Killick thought Rostow's comments might be meant to push the British as far as possible:

> It may, of course, be that much of this is a conscious ploy as part of an exercise to pull out all the stops ... but I do not think this can be wholly the case, and it will be wise to tread with the utmost caution in further exchanges in the foreseeable future. Although he has underlined his own internal difficulties in his message of 14 June, the President understands the Minister's need to put a certain slant on anything he says publicly for home consumption over the next few weeks; but it would be no bad thing, if when this has to be, the President could be given some reassuring private warning and/or explanation.[126]

This Wilson would do. Johnson's retort that Wilson should visit only if he thought it 'essential', was ignored by the Foreign Office who thought it right to go ahead with such a visit. Maclehose told Killick that he thought this decision was 'right' because

> the damage that might have been expected from a suspended idea of a visit once it had been broached could have been greater than to go ahead and announce it as we have done. We all realised there were risks either way and that in any case we were dealing with an imponderable with the President's personality.[127]

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[125] Telegram from Killick to Maclehose, Foreign Office, 17 June 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

[126] Ibid

[127] Letter from Maclehose to Killick, 17 June 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

Maclehose understood the problem of reacting to gossip and rumour coming out of the White House, regardless of its source. He therefore advised Killick unofficially that not only could he see little chance of the terms of the announcement of dissociation being further revised, but thought Killick was

> right not try to extract from the White House indications of the President's reactions to these exchanges. We are very interested in the side effects and the noises off but what matters is the texts that passed; for the rest I suggest you play it cool.[128]

Johnson's anger became demonstrably apparent, however, in his obvious reluctance to receive Wilson in Washington. Having appeared to have agreed to the Prime Minister's visit, even if not a particular date for it, the President appears to have changed his mind shortly afterwards. As Rostow put it to Rusk, 'as of the last moment the President became deeply disturbed about the Wilson visit'.[129]

Johnson's initial doubts about the visit had now apparently crystallised into definite opposition. On the day the visit was made public in London, the British were perplexed to find that the announcement had not been made simultaneously in Washington as planned. Killick noted a few days later that 'the handling of the announcement at this end was distinctly odd'.[130] He outlined events as follows:

> Although we know that the President himself, in an off-the-record talk with selected journalists the night before the announcement, made passing reference to Mr. Wilson in reply to a general question about visitors he expected during the coming weeks, the White House in fact did not itself formally make the announcement at all at the agreed time on the following morning. When our Information Department checked with the White House press people

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[128] Ibid

[129] Memorandum from Rostow to Rusk, 18 June 1966, NSF, Files of Walt Rostow, 'Wilson Visit', Box 12, LBJL

[130] Letter from J.E. Killick, British Embassy, Washington to C.M. Macleshose, Foreign Office, 20 June 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

> half an hour before the release was due, they were told enigmatically that there would be 'no White House announcement at this stage' and that further enquiries should be directed to Rostow.[131]

Behind the scenes, the President was reconsidering. At 3.30 pm that afternoon Rostow sent a Top Secret memorandum to the President summarising the evolution of the visit's announcement as he saw it. Rostow explained that the change of date from 'mid' to 'mid or late July', cabled to Wilson on 14 June, had been the President's idea. However when Wilson replied accepting the suggested timeframe on 15 June, the President conveyed to Rostow his 'deep and serious reservations about the visit as a whole' but 'concluded ... by observing reflectively that it would be difficult for us to turn down Wilson, having just agreed to Erhard'. Then, according to Rostow's recollection, he had called Secretary Rusk telling him of Johnson's 'grave second thoughts about the visit' and urging him to talk to the President immediately. And as noted earlier, on 16 June the President had marked the Prime Minister's message with a grudging 'OK if Rusk and you think necessary'.[132] According to Rostow, Rusk had thought that it was 'wise' to go ahead with visit because of the commitment to see Chancellor Ludwig Erhard of West Germany and felt the announcement should be 'as soon as possible before the week end so it would not be connected with decisions which might be made this week end'. The British were informed that the announcement could go ahead for Friday 17 June at 11.00 am. As Rostow put it 'as of last night I thought we were all together'.[133]

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131 Ibid

132 Memorandum from Walt W. Rostow to the President, Friday 17 June 1966, 3.30 pm, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Memos 1 of 2, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

133 Ibid

Rostow then outlined the position 'as things stand'.

> I take it to be our task to make bloody clear to the British Embassy in Washington and the British government in London that (1) the visit must be very carefully prepared; (2) the Prime Minister, whatever his pressures at home, should not come unless what he says here in public and in private reinforces your position on Viet Nam; (3) if this is impossible for him, he must find an excuse for the visit not to take place.[134]

The President agreed that this was the position and Rostow duly informed Rusk of the need to ensure that the relevant parties were informed. [135] The visit would go ahead but Johnson obviously felt he had been pushed into it. The President now had no enthusiasm for a meeting with the British, especially if Wilson intended to criticise US policy in Vietnam.

The Americans deliberated over the bombing of the POL targets for another two weeks. On 17 June the President acknowledged during an NSC meeting that one of the reasons for a delay in making a decision had been that Rusk had had to have time to talk to some of American's key allies, including Britain and Canada.[136] Rusk recognised that domestic and international opinion was trying to push the United States Government in opposite directions. He explained that the American people

> have a feeling of impatience, and, over time, they demand a quick end of the war as the price for their continued support. This restlessness is evident in the public opinion polls. Opinion abroad hopes that no larger military measures will be necessary... We are under constant observation by everyone abroad.[137]

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[134] Ibid

[135] Memorandum from Rostow to Rusk, NSF, Files of Walt Rostow, 'Wilson Visit', Box 12, LBJL

[136] Summary Notes of 559th NSC Meeting, 17 June, 6.05 pm, NSF, NSC Meetings File, Vol. 3, Tab. 41, 6/17/66, Vietnam - POL, LBJL

[137] Ibid

This fact was brought home later that month when a group of Democratic Senators met with Senator Mike Mansfield to discuss Vietnam. The results of the discussion were forwarded to Johnson. The report was incredibly negative, particularly in reference to the almost $2 billion per month cost of the war and the implications of that expenditure for Johnson's domestic policy. The senators were extremely concerned about the damage Vietnam was doing to the party: 'Viet Nam is worse than Korea and remember what Eisenhower did with the latter.' They also noted starkly that 'the only major country supporting us is Britain which is totally dependent on us'.[138] The Johnson administration was well aware, therefore, of the dangers posed by any weakening of Britain's public support for US policy in Vietnam, however slight it might be. Despite the fact that British 'dependency' gave Johnson's some leverage, in the days before the POL bombing, Johnson was unwilling to force Wilson to go back on his Commons statement, and not dissociate. Discussions on sterling had revealed the risks involved in making Wilson co-operate on areas of foreign and defence policy. The British might just see devaluation of the pound as preferable to complete domination by their American cousins. This being said, Johnson was extremely angry at Wilson's plans to dissociate and would therefore not stop heavy hints being made about the potential impact of such an act on Anglo-American relations. For this reason, Dean Rusk and Walt Rostow both spoke to Patrick Dean about Wilson's forthcoming visit to Washington. As instructed, they were at pains to ensure Wilson's visit did not cause Johnson further difficulties. On 22 June Dean informed Michael Palliser of the nature and content of

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[138] Discussion of Viet Nam by Committee Chairmen or Designees, Washington, 28 June 1966, 12.30 pm, FRUS, Vietnam, 1964-1968, Vol. IV, p. 465

his talks with Rostow and Rusk, noting that 'both said very much the same things.'[139] Palliser passed the details on the Prime Minister.[140]

Rostow admitted the President's first reaction to the idea of a visit by the Prime Minister had been 'far from favourable'. This was because the President was 'under great domestic pressure and was, because of Vietnam, having to sit by and see his overwhelming political power fragmented'.[141] In April 1965 Lester Pearson, Liberal Prime Minister of Canada has angered Johnson by making a critical speech on Vietnam in Philadelphia. When Johnson met Pearson at Camp David, the President had the Prime Minister by the lapels, castigating him for adding to the Presidents problems. If it wasn't bad enough some his liberal friends at home where condemning him, he now had to contend with his allies abroad joining in. [142] Rostow warned that 'if anything of this sort were to occur the damage to Anglo-American relations would be great and long-lasting'. He also passed on the White House view that if the Prime Minister 'could not say helpful things about Vietnam both privately and publicly, i.e. to leading Senators and so on, when he was in Washington' then it would be best if he did not visit. Johnson was frustrated and annoyed by the disparity between the large amount of support he was getting privately on Vietnam and the minimal public expression of that support. Rostow said the President had received messages from Mrs Gandhi, Lee Kuan Yew and the Israeli government 'urging him not to give way or abandon South Vietnam', yet they did not support him publicly.[143]

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[139] Letter from Patrick Dean to A.M. Palliser, 10 Downing Street, 22 June 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

[140] Letter from A.M. Palliser to Patrick Dean, 27 June 1966, Top Secret & Personal, PREM 13/1083, PRO

[141] Ibid

[142] Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 258-9

[143] Letter from Patrick Dean to A.M. Palliser, 22 June 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

According to Rostow, the President wanted 'practical help, not advice about how to run the war and conduct limited military operations from those who were taking no active part'.[144] As a result of these feelings on the President's part, Rostow indicated that Johnson's first reaction to the Prime Minister's message of 14 June 'had therefore been very strong, particularly to the implication that he was about to order the bombing of civilian centres when in fact all that the Americans intended to attack was oil installations and trucks.' Moreover, the President 'had very much admired the way in which the Prime Minister had stood his ground and given ... such firm support when he had only a majority of three' but 'could not understand why, when Mr. Wilson had a really big majority, he felt it necessary to dissociate himself much more than before from American action'.[145] This indicates two errors in Johnson's understanding of the situation. Firstly, in many ways the existence of a large majority allowed backbench opponents of the British stance on Vietnam the freedom to voice and act on their views in a way that was impossible when the Government's tiny majority meant the life of the Government might be jeopardised by internal dissent. And secondly, the President was ignoring the deepening unpopularity of US action in Britain, particularly the military escalation. The numbers questioning the Labour Government's support of US policy in Vietnam had not remained the same.

The following day Dean conveyed yet more political gossip to Palliser. Francis Bator, who Dean felt was 'friendly' to the British, had the previous night told an Embassy officer much the same as Rostow had said to him. However, he said 'specifically that if there is a row between the Prime Minister and the

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144 Ibid
145 Ibid

President over all this it will spill over into a lot of other matters'. Dean suspected this meant 'support for sterling'. He therefore again suggested Wilson rethink dissociation.

> It does seem to me that if the bombing takes place and is successful in hitting the oil installations only and killing very few civilians, it would be well worthwhile if it were possible for the Prime Minister either not to make a public dissociation statement or to say the absolute minimum.[146]

The same day the Foreign Office informed the Prime Minister that:

> even making allowance for some colourful reporting by Rusk and Rostow - I think we must take it that, whatever the President's present mood, he has been thinking and speaking privately pretty harshly about us during the past few days.[147]

London was aware that dissociation would be a gamble; no-one could predict Johnson's response. To Wilson's credit, he resisted pressure from his own civil servants, and maintained his position on the POL bombings.

Reaction to POL Bombings

On the day of the POL bombings 10 Downing Street issued a carefully worded statement that Wilson later read out to the House. The Foreign Office apparently tried to water down the statement offering Wilson an alternative, but Wilson refused: 'I indicated to them into which part of their filing system they were free to put it.'[148] The key sections of his statement were as follows:

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146 Letter from Patrick Dean to A.M. Palliser, 10 Downing Street, 23 June 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

147 Top Secret Minute to the Prime Minister from A.W., 'President Johnson', 24 June 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

148 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 320/321

> It is difficult for the British Government, which is not involved in the fighting in Viet-Nam, to assess the importance of any particular action which the United States Government regards as militarily necessary in this conflict. Nevertheless, we have made it clear on many occasions that we could not support an extension of the bombing to such areas, even though we were confident that the United States forces would take every precaution, as always, to avoid civilian casualties. We believe that the value of each application of force must be judged not merely in terms of the military needs which it is designed to meet, but also in terms of the additional suffering and distress which it inflicts upon innocent people and the effect it can have on the prospects for an early move to a political solution. ... For these reasons, when President Johnson informed me that the United States Government judged it necessary to attack targets touching on the populated areas of Hanoi and Haiphong, I told him that we should ... feel bound to reaffirm that we must dissociate ourselves from an action of this kind.[149]

Despite this, Wilson announced that Britain remained 'convinced .. that the United States are right to continue to assist the millions of South Vietnamese, who no longer wish to live under Communist domination' and blamed the North Vietnamese refusal to talk for the continuation of fighting.[150] Wilson thus delivered his statement on the lines suggested by the White House, except for the exclusion of any reference to SEATO.

Wilson was criticised by the leader of the opposition, Edward Heath, as holding 'a completely untenable position', in generally supporting the US policy in Vietnam while at the same time 'dissociating himself from the implementation of that policy'.[151] This was because, as the *Economist* later put it, Wilson had 'alienated [the] US, and weakened the cardinal operating principle of Anglo-American alliance that UK generally goes along with US on big questions of foreign

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[149] Hansard, Vol. 730, 1966-1967, 29 June 1966, Col. 1796
[150] Ibid
[151] Ibid, Col. 1797

policy, while retaining useful 'nudging' function at times'.[152] Wilson defended himself by arguing it was,

> perfectly possible, reasonable and logical to support a general policy without committing oneself to every action taken in support of that policy. To assume in advance that one will support every action taken in support of a given policy might lead Her Majesty's Government, or even Her Majesty's Opposition, into a very difficult situation.[153]

Despite criticism from the official opposition, most within his own party supported the dissociation, although some argued for a complete dissociation from US policy in Vietnam. There was undoubtedly a fear that this latest action on the part of the Americans could trigger intervention by China or the Soviet Union, and thus spark a third world war.[154] On the day of the bombing Barbara Castle noted in her diary,

> What will Harold do now? None of us were consulted of course, but I was immensely relieved when he volunteered a statement to the House dissociating himself from it. It was a careful minimum of dissociation, however.[155]

Wilson went to Cabinet the next day to ask for its approval of his dissociation statement. Richard Crossman noted that:

> we did so unenthusiastically because few of us, I think, felt it was more than a posture. We knew perfectly well that as soon as he got across the Atlantic and talked to Johnson, Harold would indicate to the President that there was nothing in what he had said or done which made his loyalty to the Vietnam policy less profound.[156]

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[152] Ibid

[153] Hansard, Vol. 730, 1966-1967, 29 June 1966, Col. 1797

[154] For example, David Winnick, M.P. & Manny Shinwell, M.P. Hansard, Vol. 730, 1966-67, June 20-July 1, Cols. 1806 & 1807

[155] *Barbara Castle diaries*, 29 June 1965, p. 72

[156] *Crossman diaries*, 30 June 1966, p. 214

British dissociation from the POL bombing was not the only negative reaction around the world. A number of nations voiced their objections to this latest escalation of the war. George Ball, Acting Secretary of State while Rusk was in Canberra at the SEATO meeting, was faced with responding to the criticisms.[157] During a meeting of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, William Fulbright said that it was significant that none of America's NATO allies had given support for the raids. Defending US action, Ball thought the British Government's linkage between the POL targets and a loss of civilian life was a mistake.[158]

Wilson faced a double bind. Not only was he confronted with intense Parliamentary pressure to extend his dissociation of the POL bombings to an outright dissociation of American policy, he also knew that he had to prevent a full-scale rift with President Johnson. On 1 July Wilson sent a six-page telegram to Johnson in an attempt to justify his decision to dissociate, and as Crossman suspected, to assure the President of his continuing support of American's general policy in Vietnam. He began with a now familiar refrain, 'my thoughts have been very much with you during these past two exceptionally difficult days'.[159] He then went on to outline the nature and extent of the negative criticism he had received over the POL bombing operation and castigated his critics for being 'more vociferous in their criticism than fertile in providing any constructive alternative'. He again explained the spread of opposition to the war:

> Many of our more moderate British critics are gradually being maneouvred into taking their stand with extremists whose views

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157 *The Times*, 1 July 1966, p. 11

158 Ibid

159 From Prime Minister to President, 1 July 1966, NSF, Files of Walt Rostow, 'Wilson Visit', Box 12; also PREM 13/1808

> as put forward they would probably, if challenged, repudiate. The fact that the British people are physically remote from the problem and, in particular, are not suffering the tragedy of the losses which your people are suffering serves to increase this lack of understanding of my full support for your basic policy.[160]

He then got on to the real reason for his telegram:

> I know that you must feel that some actions and statements of ours in the past few days have not been helpful. And there are no doubt in both countries those ready to exploit those actions for the sake of sowing discord between the two government or of pushing the two of us further apart, you in one direction me in another, from the position we have jointly held and still hold.

He elaborated further:

> I am being pressed to acknowledge that the logic of disagreeing with this particular operation would be a total denunciation of the whole of your Vietnam policy. This I have firmly rejected, not only because I distrust the motives of those who put this argument forward, but because their argument itself is balls … after the deepest heart searching ... I cannot see that there is any change in your basic position that I could urge on you.'[161]

Still, Wilson was assertive in defending his decision to dissociate.

> I want you to realise that where we have differed in detail - but never in basic policy - and have had to express a different point of view, while we recognise that this can only add to your difficulties (and especially this time be more than a little hurtful), we believe that what we have done is right and necessary. I must be quite frank in saying that this is the price I have to pay for being able to hold the line in our own country where the public reaction is very widespread even if, as I have said, it stems from widely differing motives.[162]

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160 Ibid
161 Ibid
162 Ibid

After repeating his assurance that he was stoutly defending the US record on peace moves, Wilson again put himself forward as a mediator.

> But I wanted to make it absolutely clear that I would not contemplate taking any steps towards it unless I thought it had your agreement, not grudging or reluctant agreement, but wholehearted feeling that it was right and that it would not add to your difficulties.[163]

He had one possibility in mind and that was trying a personal approach to Kosygin during his forthcoming visit to the British Trade Fair in Moscow.

The Johnson administration considered Wilson's telegram the following day. Patrick Dean spoke to Rostow and asked about the President's reaction to the message. Rostow related to Dean that once again Johnson felt that Wilson might use his forthcoming visit to Washington 'for political purposes at home' and that the visit 'must not be used in any way to undercut the President's position, particularly on American soil'.[164]

> Dean valiantly defended the Prime Minister saying he was sure he knew very well what was in the President's mind and that the whole tone of his recent message showed how sympathetic he was to the President's difficulties. Moreover, the Prime Minister's statement had been very carefully worded and two thirds of it had been devoted to confirming the U.S. basic policy as regard Vietnam still had the support of the British Government.

Rostow could not resist asking Dean to request that the Prime Minister say at some stage 'that he had been worried over the risk of inflicting casualties among the civilian population if the bombing operation took place but that he was very pleased

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163 Ibid

164 Letter to Michael Palliser from Patrick Dean, 2 July 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

to hear that the casualties, if indeed there had been any, were extremely light.'[165] Wilson's did not change his position on this, and nothing of the sort was said during a debate in the House on 7 July.

Despite Rostow's view that Johnson's had 'not gone up in smoke' on receiving Wilson's message, the following day Johnson wrote a terse, four-paragraph reply to Wilson's cable that demonstrates Johnson's continuing irritation on this matter:

> Your message gave me the picture of your political problem and how you intend to deal with it. My problem is not merely political. I must also convince Hanoi that the will of the United States cannot be broken by debate or pressures - at home or from abroad.[166]

On the proposal of another Wilson initiative, Johnson was non-committal, although Rostow had in fact felt it would be useful:

> We must and will continue to apply hard military pressure. There should be no ambiguity about this. It would be useful for the Soviets to be clear on this point. Yet it may give you some problems in connection with your trip to Moscow. If you do go to Moscow, I would hope you could canvass all useful possibilities with Kosygin and his colleagues and that your joint responsibilities as co-chairman might lead to some constructive initiative...

He also informed Wilson that 'an acceptable date' for his visit would be 29 July.[167]

The telegram ended abruptly, just with salutary 'best wishes'. Rostow had suggested

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165 Ibid

166 From the President to the Prime Minister, 2 July 1966, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 12, File: Wilson Visit; also PREM 13/1083; Letter from Patrick Dean, Washington to Michael Palliser, 10 Downing Street, 2 July 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

167 Ibid

Johnson concluded with the statement 'I look forward to talking with you of these and other matters'.[168] The President clearly did not look forward to such discussions.

Moreover, he was unhappy with Wilson's use of the word 'balls' in his message. Bruce felt responsible for the Prime Minister's use of the 'rather colourful word.'[169] Wilson intended to use the word 'bull' but had asked Bruce if he thought the President 'would be offended if he substituted balls'. Bruce later noted that the latter term had greater currency in Britain than the former but at the time told Wilson 'that the two words, and the physical juxtaposition of which they were expressive, were so intimately connected that I believed them equally apposite.' Bruce had assured Wilson that Johnson 'would not be disturbed by this picturesque description.'[170] Bruce's explanation of events was not passed on to Johnson as it was felt to be 'chancy humor'.[171] Again, Wilson over-estimated the intimacy of his personal and working relationship with the President, and unfortunately for him, Bruce's usually sound judgement, was on this occasion flawed.

Despite Wilson's lengthy and repeated explanations behind his decision to dissociate, Johnson remained puzzled over it and asked Bruce to comment on the reasons behind it, the position the Administration should adopt during the forthcoming Washington visit, the agenda, and what Wilson himself was likely to say and do during the visit.[172] Bruce was sympathetic to Wilson's domestic political pressures on Vietnam, and argued as much to Washington. He began by stating, yet again, that Wilson was 'a political animal, highly skilled, intelligent, a master at

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168 NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, 'Wilson Visit', Box 12, Doc. 2

169 Telegram from Bruce to George Ball, 4 July 1966, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, 'Wilson Visit', Box 12, LBJL

170 Ibid

171 Ibid

172 Telegram from Bruce to Ball, 11 July 1966, NSF, Files of Walt Rostow, 'Wilson Visit', Box 12, LBJL

infighting ... and usually adept at making ambiguous public statements to serve his political aims'. He explained that Wilson had 'little or no room for maneuver' over the POL bombings because, in order to 'meet tactical pressures from within his own party' he had in previous months frequently stated that there were limits on British support.[173] While Wilson was committed to preserving friendly relations with the United States and was 'prepared to cooperate with the United States on major American policies in ammeasure [sic] that would not always be popular here', in order 'to counter the charge of being a mere puppet or satellite of the US, HMG would, from time to time, assert its independence by taking exception to certain details of policies to which he [sic] is ready to give general support'.[174] Indeed, Bruce felt that Wilson regarded Vietnam 'as posing in acute form the problem of defining acceptable limits of Anglo-American cooperation'.[175]

Moreover, Bruce rightly acknowledged that Wilson's personal convictions on the war had also come into play: 'the military buildup apparently increased his fears of escalation and certainly cut against the grain of his belief that there could be no clear-cut military victory in Vietnam'. Believing strongly in the need for a political settlement and increasingly frustrated by the lack of one, Wilson began to listen closely when 'the dissidence over Vietnam widened to include a substantial number of Labor MPs in the center and on the right-wing' because party management was now at stake. According to Bruce, Wilson was also 'influenced by an exaggerated idea of his possible effectiveness as a mediator with the Soviet authorities. He

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173 Ibid
174 Ibid
175 Ibid

probably believes that had it not been for dissociation Kosygin would not now be about to receive him in Moscow.'[176]

The Ambassador, taking care not to sound too supportive of Wilson's decision, admitted that the Prime Minister 'may have trapped himself ... prematurely ... by foreclosing the possibility of later differentiating between attacks successfully confined to military targets and those which have, in fact, consequences for civilian populations'. He admitted however that it was doubtful Wilson could have sustained such a distinction within the Labour Party. He concluded by saying 'what saved him in domestic political terms was his not going ... the whole hog with us'.[177]

Bruce then went on to respond to the President's obvious fury over Wilson's statements and subsequent comments to the House. Johnson apparently expressed his firm opinion that British support for America's Vietnam policy should be complete.[178] Given what he had already said about Wilson's practical difficulties, Bruce suggested the President 'content himself with remarking on his disappointment in this connection, and say he expects continuing fidelity to the promises of adherence to our overall objectives in Vietnam'. Having done that, Johnson could then 'effectively add that after reviewing the debates in the House of Commons he had noticed that Heath, Douglas-Home and others of the opposition had been much stronger advocates for American policy in Vietnam' than Wilson's Government.[179]

Bruce felt that he could not guarantee Wilson's silence over Vietnam during his trip to Washington:

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176 Ibid
177 Ibid
178 Ibid
179 Ibid

> Wilson is a cautious master of obfuscation. No one can guarantee in advance the conduct of another; the tongue is one of the least predictable of human organs. But given the overriding desire and necessity for the Prime Minister to remain on good terms with the President, or to restore any impairment of them, he will be doubly careful to try to avoid saying anything embarrassing to us.[180]

At this stage the Ambassador predicted that Wilson would 'descant' upon British internal politics, Rhodesia, Vietnam, Europe, Arms Sales by Britain to the United States, East of Suez commitments, the economic situation in Britain.

The following day Bruce attempted to analyse Wilson's decision-making still further. In a question and answer exercise sent to Washington by cable, he asked why Wilson did not recognize that with the failure of Hanoi and Peking to talk 'there would be progressive increase in scale of US military power' in Vietnam, since the President was determined to see the war through. He answered tentatively that:

> Wilson has never made that 'logical' jump. For political reasons he would not find it possible openly to endorse. He felt that he had to maintain posture that military victory in Vietnam not on cards, even though auspices for peace were so discouraging.[181]

Washington, and the President in particular, had three major misgivings on the whole dissociation affair. Firstly, why Wilson had gone to the 'lengths of positive dissociation' from the bombings, 'once it had been explained to him in advance that the sites selected were not near city centres' but legitimate military objectives that 'could be taken out without substantial civilian losses.' Secondly, why, given his

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180 Ibid

181 Bruce to SecState, Washington, 12 July 1966, NSF, Country File, Europe & USSR, UK, Box 209, Uk, Vol. VIII, Cables, 1/66-7/66, Doc. 8

now large majority, Wilson could not 'more easily have controlled rebels than in last parliament.' And lastly, if the United States escalated its bombing campaign even further would Wilson engage in other 'dissociations'?[182] Bruce admitted he wasn't certain of the answer to the first question, he surmised that Wilson may have 'felt trapped' by previous commitments, may have felt that the bombings changed the situation psychologically and politically even if not necessarily militarily, and of course, he had to manage his party. The second area of contention was easier to explain. Wilson could, and indeed had, been able to manage the hard left on Vietnam but now the problem was more widespread and 'it was because Wilson went part of way through dissociation to dramatize importance of "independent" British position re. threat of expanding war ... that he was able to avoid wider pattern of revolt in party ranks'. The last question surrounding the chances of further dissociations was, of course, unanswerable but Bruce argued that Wilson 'had made it ... difficult for himself by taking this decision. He cannot 'reassociate' himself if bombing patterns develops [a] new turn'.[183]

Without doubt, the dissociation episode had a detrimental impact on Anglo-American relations, particularly the personal relationship between Wilson and Johnson. Philip Kaiser, Deputy US Ambassador to Great Britain, explained that

> When we bombed Hanoi, Wilson felt compelled to criticize us, though he did so rather mildly. Johnson reacted with typical vehemence, sharply castigating the Prime Minister. As a consequence, relations between the two men, never too warm, deteriorated temporarily. [184]

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182 Ibid

183 Ibid

184 Kaiser, *Journeying Far and Wide*, p. 209.

William Bundy agrees stating 'the President just didn't trust Wilson' after disassociation.

> He thought he was trying to make time politically ....there's no doubt in the President's mind this established Wilson, as far as I know unchangingly, as a man not to go to the well with.[185]

On Thursday, 14 July the Cabinet took note of a statement by the Foreign Secretary on the United States which said:

> our relations with the United States Government were passing through a difficult phase. They were understandable [sic] preoccupied with the conflict in Vietnam and, although our opposition to the bombing of the oil installations near Hanoi and Haiphong had been expected, there had been an adverse reaction to our public statement. Our position over the sale of arms which might be used in Vietnam had also been the cause of some friction. Although we must maintain our right to disagree from time to time with those aspects of United States policy of which we could not approve, it was important to our interests that there should be no major disagreement between us.[186]

Washington and London recognised that the summer of 1966 was the lowest point in the Johnson/Wilson relationship so far. Attempts to repair the damage began straight away.

Wilson's Trip to Moscow, 16-18 July 1966 & The Sterling Crisis

In early July the British were faced with yet another crisis over sterling. Despite the Chancellor's optimism over the state of the British economy, expressed

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185 Transcript, William Bundy Oral History Interview by Paige E. Mulholland, 29 May 1971, Tape IV, p. 25 & 36, LBJL

186 Cabinet Minutes, 14 July 1966, CAB 128/41, PRO

at a meeting on 1 July, the publication on 4 July of gold figures for June showed a further drain on sterling.[187] There were a number of factors involved in this, not least of which was the cost of the seven week Seaman's Strike that began on 16 May.

Rampant speculation ensued and by 14 July the Labour Government faced hard choices on how to deal with the crisis. At the Cabinet meeting on that day Wilson, Callaghan and George Brown were in agreement that 'it was no answer to go on borrowing', that there had to be 'a fundamental appraisal of strategy'.[188] They announced that they would make a statement in the House that day saying overseas spending would be cut by £100 million (in addition to previously announced defence cuts). In the course of the debate on this decision and in response to an attack by Michael Stewart who felt this would have great effects on UK foreign relations and 'ruin our influence', Wilson admitted it would mean '£50 million out of Germany and £50 million East of Suez'.[189] A statement was duly delivered that announced a thorough review of Britain's financial position and the necessary measures needed to rectify the situation.[190] It did nothing to alleviate the pressure on sterling.

The Cabinet also agreed that a fuller statement would be made the following Wednesday, 20 July, announcing measures to compress internal demand. The Americans were keen to influence this particular statement. Secretary to the Treasury, Henry Fowler telephoned Callaghan on the evening of 14 July to express his disappointment in the performance of the British economy in the last year and to urge the Chancellor to take swift action to deal with the present crisis that 'not only sounded adequate but would prove to be adequate'. Callaghan outlined the program

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187 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 322
188 *Barbara Castle diaries*, 14 July 1966, p. 73
189 Ibid
190 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 328

of measures to be undertaken and said he felt confident that it would be a success, although it would 'comprise a very tough package for the country to swallow.' He also said there was 'no dissension in the Cabinet, except with respect to overseas expenditures, and the source of that problem really was in the United States'.[191]

The US Contingency Group that had been assembled the previous year to discuss sterling issues met again. The Group acknowledged Wilson's difficulties in the long-term and admitted that he still faced the prospect of saving money by cutting defence expenditure, both internally and externally. There was great domestic pressure for Wilson to do this. The US position, however, remained opposed to the proposed British cure. McNamara in particular still believed it was 'absolutely essential' that the UK remain in the Far East. Fowler informed the President of McNamara's views:

> For the next year or two, he thinks anything which will smell of a British pull out will fatally undermine our domestic base on Viet Nam. Further, he believes that confrontation in Malaysia will, in fact, continue indefinitely and is determined that it remain a British responsibility.[192]

Fowler admitted the US faced some 'critical choices' on this issue and informed the President that his advisers were 'of two minds': some supporting McNamara's view that Britain had to remain in the Far East at all costs; others believing devaluation of the pound should not be ruled out. Fowler personally believed that,

> if we adopt Bob's position—and Wilson goes alone—it will either cost us a weak Britain and a great deal of balance of payments money or, even more likely, a weak Britain and an

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191 Note of Telephone Conversation between Secretary of the Treasury Fowler and Chancellor of the Exchequer Callaghan at 6.30 pm on 15 July 1966, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Wilson Visit, Box 12, Doc. 1 g

192 Memo for the President from Henry Fowler, 18 July 1966, Subject: The Sterling Crisis and the US Bargaining Position vis-a-vis the UK, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Wilson Visit, Box 12, Doc. 1g

> eventual devaluation of sterling. Either would have disastrous consequences for the dollar—and for our international political position.

Moreover, he did

> not believe that this, or any other U.K. government, will be willing to maintain an overseas position in which it does not believe, for the sake of a friend—unless that friend is willing to pay for the favor.[193]

As Fowler felt the US could not afford an open-ended financial commitment to the UK he argued,

> our first priority should be to move the United Kingdom to save its long-term economic and financial position and thereby to prevent potentially disastrous consequences for the United States, our over-all foreign policy, and the stability of the Free World financial system. A weak ally is of no use to us East of Suez, in Europe, in the international financial set-up, or anywhere else.

Despite Fowler arguments, Johnson, a politician with an image to consider, particularly in the lead up to Congressional elections, favoured McNamara's view that the US could not afford to act alone as world policeman.

The White House was well aware that sterling would be on the agenda during Wilson's visit to Washington. In the middle of the sterling crisis, between 16-18 July Wilson visited Moscow. the Prime Minister faced much criticism for leaving the country amidst an economic crisis and partly for this reason Wilson defended his decision in his memoirs, perhaps exaggerating the impact of his trip.[194] Ostensibly arranged so that he could visit a British trade fair, the primary reason for his visit was to mediate over Vietnam. Although Wilson was genuine in his desire to encourage

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193 Ibid

194 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 328-331

the Russians to intervene on Vietnam, he was once again primarily motivated by domestic considerations. After the Prime Minister's announcement of dissociation, Wilson faced calls from his left-wingers for complete dissociation from US policy. On 6 July a petition signed by 100 MPs had called for a total condemnation of US policy and Wilson had had to intervene personally to prevent a PLP split. Before the visit to Moscow the US Department of State felt 'the subject matter and visibility of the trip are certainly designed to earn (and have already won) new political points for the Prime Minister on the domestic front in the UK, even if the gains in foreign relations terms turn out to be very minor'.[195] It was also recognised that:

> coming less than two weeks before a Wilson visit to Washington to see President Johnson, the trip to the Soviet capital also gives Wilson the aura and glamor of confidante and go-between between East and West. This is a role which the British have long sought to play, while remaining closely linked to the US.[196]

They also noted that Wilson's ploy had 'effectively restored the situation among Labour Party MPs' when he was able to announce the visit to Moscow on 7 July during a Commons debate, 'together with a Government motion that implied criticism of the bombings without directly expressing or withdrawing general support for US policy in Vietnam.' According to US intelligence:

> In the division on the Government's motion some of the original rebels, such as Michael Foot, voted for the Government; none voted against; and only thirty-one chose to abstain. Many stated that the announcement of the Moscow visit had strongly influenced their ballot.[197]

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195 Intellgence Note from Thomas L. Hughes to Rusk, 15 July 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Memos 1 of 2, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

196 Ibid

197 Ibid

The Government won its motion.

Publicly Wilson made great play of the fact that his visit had Johnson's approval, although again the State Department held no great hopes for the visit in relation to Vietnam, believing correctly that the Russians would merely use Wilson to convey their belief that the dangers of escalation were great. However, in his memoirs Wilson emphasized what he called his 'main point' in the discussions on Vietnam. The North Vietnamese had been threatening to put American POWs on trial in Hanoi and it was hoped Wilson could urge the Russians to intervene on this issue, particularly considering the probable US repercussions should such trials go ahead. The Americans did not believe the Russians would want to discuss this.[198] However, Wilson claims that he 'urged them as strongly as I could to bring home to Hanoi what this would mean. Clearly they were impressed; their fears of escalation were very real and I was left in no doubt … that they were going to act. They did.'[199]

He therefore judged his visit a success:

> President Johnson later privately said, and Senator Mansfield, Senate majority leader, clearly on the President's briefing, publicly said that it was my intervention which had stopped the trials, and headed off the most dangerous situation in the war. Without doubt, US opinion, sharply divided on Vietnam, would have lurched violently to the side of the hawks if the pilots had been put on trial and I have little doubt, from all the President told me, that he would have had to respond.[200]

Wilson certainly voiced his belief that he had been vital in getting the North Vietnamese to rethink their plans for show trials. At their meeting in late July 1966, Wilson described to the President and his advisers how he had warned Kosygin

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198 Ibid
199 Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 329-330
200 Ibid, p. 330

'repeatedly and categorically of the reaction which the Soviet Government must expect if the Government of North Viet-Nam took exemplary action against the captured United States pilots; and he thought it reasonable to believe that it was as a result of Moscow's transmitting this warning to Hanoi that the Government of North Viet-Nam had subsequently adopted a more lenient attitude.'[201] This partly explains Wilson's continuing belief that he was playing a vital role as a mediator between the United States and the Soviet Union/North Vietnam, despite the fact that he had to conclude after his Moscow trip that there was 'no give whatever' in the Soviet's position on Vietnam. He told President Johnson that Kosygin remained 'bitter and tough', casting the US President as 'the bloodthirsty villain of the piece' and working for his 'increasing isolation and friendlessness in the world'.[202] Nevertheless, Wilson believed his visit had been worthwhile, believing the 'unsensational relationship' that was developing between Kosygin and himself, had 'real - if still largely potential - value'.[203]

During his visit to Moscow, Wilson was 'kept in close touch with the situation in London.'[204] After the financial measures announced by Callaghan on 20 July, the US government acknowledged that Wilson had 'clearly swallowed the necessary economic medicine'.[205] Indeed, the steps taken were extremely tough. Along with even more cuts in public investment and tighter controls on hire purchase and foreign exchange, the Labour government introduced a six-month freeze on pay and price

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201 Record of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and His Advisers and President Johnson and His Advisers at the White House on Friday, 29 July 1966, Visit of the Prime Minister to the United States and Canada, 28-30 July 1966, PREM 13/1083, PRO

202 Telegram from Prime Minister to President, 19 July 1966, PREM 13/1262, PRO

203 Ibid

204 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 331

205 Memo for the President from Francis M. Bator, Thursday 21 July 1966, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, 'Wilson Visit', Box 12, LBJL

increases, to be followed by a further six months of 'severe restraint'. Not surprisingly, this package proved extremely unpopular with much of the Labour movement, including many within the Parliamentary Labour Party. Again, the US Federal Reserve Bank helped co-ordinate a massive purchase of sterling to restore confidence.

It was at this time that the British Embassy in Washington began to get the distinct impression that many US officials were no longer terrified by the prospect of a British devaluation. Some of this feeling stemmed 'from the D.O.D. [Department of Defence] who feel that continued United Kingdom psychological support of the United States in the Far East is of more importance than the sterling rate.'[206] The Prime Minister would therefore have to raise the issue of further financial support, if needed, during his trip to Washington.

Wilson's Visit to Washington - 29 July 1966

With the Wilson-LBJ relationship fraught over POL dissociation, the Prime Minister's plans to visit Washington proved predictably contentious. Wilson later admitted 'no overseas visit had a worse build-up'.[207] Nevertheless, despite - or indeed because of - the careful preparation that took place, the visit went remarkably well.

Shortly before the Prime Minister's visit a member of the Foreign Office, J.A. Thomson, met with White House aides and State Department officials, concluding that most agreed with Rostow's view that the mood would be 'tough' but 'polite'

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206 Telegram from Mr. Killock, British Embassy, Washington to Foreign Office, 27 July 1966, PREM 13/1262, PRO

207 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 341

when Wilson arrived in Washington.[208] Thomson reported back to London that many people spoke of 'the President's adverse reaction to Her Majesty's Government's recent statements about the bombing and the sale of arms' and that Mr. Rostow had observed that the President 'was hurt'.[209] Reportedly Johnson wondered why the Prime Minister was coming. Thomson observed that 'one implication of this remark was if the main reason for the visit lay in domestic political considerations in the United Kingdom the President would not be sympathetic.' However Thomson found evidence of a 'deeper and more important implication' that was conveyed to him by Francis Bator, someone who did not always agree with Rostow. Thomson explained that Bator was Rostow's deputy on political matters but 'is autonomous ... in economic matters and has independent, direct access to the President'. Apparently Bator was so concerned that Thomson knew the President's mind on the question of Wilson's visit, that he concluded their interview in Washington on 15 July by driving Thomson to the railway station, talking as they went.[210] According to Bator, Johnson had two criteria for judging the worth of the visits:

> (a) what effect will it have on his big problem, Viet Nam?
> (b) how much confidence could he have in Britain controlling her affairs in such a way that she could play a useful and important role?

Overall, Thomson was left with the impression that it was hoped in the White House that the Prime Minister could 'restore the President's shaken confidence in the reliability of Britain as an ally'. This questioning of British trustworthiness as an ally

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208 Report by J.A. Thomson on 'The Prime Minister's visit to Washington', 18 July 1966, PREM 13/126, PRO
209 Ibid
210 Ibid

was due to Wilson's statements on arms sales and on Vietnam; by yet another sterling crisis; and by doubts in Washington that Britain could sustain the world role it had outlined for itself in the latest defence review. On Vietnam, Bator surmised that the President hoped Wilson's actions before and after the visit would reiterate general support for the President's policy; repeat that 'the conflict and its continuance was the fault of Hanoi'; and completely refuse to say 'anything substantive about the bombing of oil installations or the sale of arms' instead referring all questioners to Hansard. Overall, it would be considered a 'disappointment' if the effect of Wilson's visit was 'merely neutral' on Vietnam.[211]

But, a few days later, the atmosphere in Washington appears to have changed. Sir Patrick Dean cabled London on 22 July to report on his latest talks with Rostow and Bator and wrote that:

> It is clear that the Prime Minister's announcement of the new economic measures has created a new situation and a much better climate here. It has removed previous doubts about the purpose and value of the Prime Minister's visit and has defined fairly clearly the main issues for discussion with the President. As Rostow put it 'there are now very basic things for the President and the Prime Minister to discuss'. All talk about 'a laundry list' has disappeared.[212]

Wilson had stuck to the September 1965 'understanding'. Monetary policy and Britain's world role would nevertheless be at the top of the agenda in Washington.

George Ball felt that Harold Wilson's visit offered an 'opportunity for an act of statemanship' on the President's behalf. Perhaps sensing that Wilson might pull out of the 'understanding' now that he had a new majority, Ball, in a lengthy

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211 Ibid

212 Telegram from Sir Patrick Dean to Permanent Under Secretary, Foreign Office, 21 July 1966, PREM 13/1262, PRO

memorandum, told the President that instead of following a 'general line of short-term improvisation that has marked our relations with a succession of British Governments since the end of the war' the alternative would be 'to look beyond the immediate present and to talk with Wilson in some depth about the longer-range relations between our two nations based on a clear understanding of the respective roles which each country should play in the development of a rational world system. This is a difficult and rigorous exercise. It requires each of us clearly face reality'.[213]

Ball explained the reality of the situation as he saw it:

> Britain must recognize that she is no longer the center of a world system but that she can nevertheless play a critical role by applying her talents and resources to the leadership of Western Europe. We, on our part, should face the fact that it is basically unhealthy to encourage the United Kingdom to continue as America's poor relation, living beyond her means by periodic American bailouts. We must, in other words, redefine the so-called 'special relationship' in terms consistent with the longer-range interest of both our nations.[214]

The British in Washington got wind of these thoughts but were reassured that this was Ball experiencing 'end-of-termism', and that there was no serious likelihood of the President or Secretary of State approving this action. Nor did they, not least because to have taken Ball seriously at the time would have been to broach a major realignment of the alliance system during an already difficult period for US foreign policy. In the event, the discussion between the President and the Prime Minister did not venture beyond short and medium-term policies.

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213 Memorandum for the President from George Ball, 'Subject: Harold Wilson's Visit -- The Opportunity for an Act of Statesmanship', 22 July 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 209, UK, Vol. VIII, Memos 2 of 2, 1/66-7/66, LBJL

214 Ibid

On the morning of Friday, 29 July Johnson and Wilson had a private talk for about one hour and fifteen minutes. As was now usual, their talk included a discussion of their respective domestic concerns. Johnson reported to the other participants of the talks that 'he felt that he now had a very good understanding and appreciation of the problems which faced the United Kingdom, and he hoped that the Prime Minister felt the same as regards the United States'. The President also said the discussion had been 'very interesting and most helpful' and that they discussed in detail the Prime Minister's trip to the Soviet Union and had exchanged views on their common problems, especially Viet-Nam, the British position East of Suez, the German situation and the British economic measures.[215] The President said the purpose of the meeting 'was to strengthen the ties which bound the two countries ... in order that they might go forward in unity to deal with their common problems and to give the necessary leadership to their two peoples.'[216]

The meeting adjourned for lunch at which there were the usual toasts. The President began with a reference to recent events: 'someone suggested, to-day, Mr. Prime Minister, that I begin by saying this toast: "My good dis-associates." But this is not the case at all. For 200 years the British and the Americans have had their differences but from them have emerged a strong bond, a hearty spirit, and a mutual respect that neither adversaries nor age can diminish.' Later on in his toast, Johnson appeared to compare Wilson to Winston Churchill:

> In World War II, Mr. Prime Minister, England saved herself by fortitude and the world by example. You personally are asking

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[215] Memorandum of Conversation, 'General Remarks by the President', The White House, 29 July 1966, NSF, Country File, Europe & USSR, UK, Box 216, UK, PM Wilson Visit Briefing Book 1 of 2, 7/29/66, Doc. 2N; Record of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and His Advisers and President Johnson and His Advisers at the White House on Friday, 29 July 1966, Visit of the Prime Minister to the United States and Canada, 28-30 July 1966, PREM 13/1083

[216] Ibid

of the British people to-day the same fortitude - the same resolve - that turned the tide in those days.

I must say that England is blessed now, as it was blessed then, with gallant and hardy leadership. In you, Sir, she has a man of mettle. She is blessed with a leader whose own enterprise and courage will show the way. We believe your firmness and your leadership have impressed the people of the world deeply in the tradition of the great men of Britain.

Mr. Prime Minister, I feel blessed, in a time of some distress and danger, with a comrade who has, in addition to his pluck, a delightful sense of humour. In the late evening, when I am going through that night reading and the cables, Mr. Prime Minister, that does make a difference.[217]

Wilson's response included his thanks that the President had rejected the 'disassociates' theme, commenting, 'We are allies and not satellites and I think as long as we are allies and not satellites we are of more use to you, we are of more use to ourselves, and we are of more use to the world.'[218] According to Wilson, the President's 'gently ironic allusion' to British dissociation as Wilson put it, did not detract from the warmth of the President's speech, which stressed the permanence of the bonds between Great Britain and the United States.[219] Wilson was also so pleasantly surprised by the fact that Johnson never mentioned the dissociation episode again during the talks, nor did he say anything about British arms supplies for use in Vietnam. Of course, this may well have been a case of not opening old wounds.

When the meeting resumed at 2.30 pm, the only commitment the Prime Minister made regarding the 'joint effort' in South East Asia was to allow British Army engineers to remain in Thailand for a further year to help with civil

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217 Ibid
218 Ibid
219 Telegram from Prime Minister Wilson to Holt/Holyoake, Canberra, 3 August 1966, PREM 13/1262, PRO

construction projects and to send specialist troops currently in Malaya to deal with communist guerrillas on the Thai border once confrontation in Malaysia had ended.[220] At a later meeting between Rusk and Wilson, the Secretary of State said he wondered if the recent episode with the captured US airmen perhaps suggested Hanoi was susceptible to pressure and consequently wondered if it was worth 'trying to organise some kind of joint Parliamentary and Congressional demarche in relation to Hanoi to try to persuade the Government of North Viet-Nam to respond to the repeatedly declared willingness of the United States to start discussions for bringing the war to an end'.[221] He suggested the Prime Minister convey a message to Kosygin on those lines, emphasising the US interest in de-escalating, rather than escalating, the conflict. The United Kingdom might also approach the Government of non-aligned and commonwealth countries to the same end. Rusk also suggested mobilizing the support of the Pope and all living holders of the Nobel Peace Prize. In response to this, Wilson agreed that this might work but suggested 'that any proposal of this kind might be combined with, or be an alternative to, the suggestion that the United States should now stabilise the level of their troops in Viet-Nam and abstain from any further build-up in return for an undertaking that the Ho Chi Minh trail would be effectively blocked'.[222] Rusk said he would speak to the President about this but could see no reason 'to reject the idea out of hand'. The Prime Minister felt:

> the first step might be to send two or three British Parliamentarians to Washington to discuss the project with such Congressional spokesman as the United States

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[220] Ibid
[221] Ibid
[222] Ibid

> might suggest. Thereafter, the Commonwealth might be mobilised to support the initiative. And the process might culminate in a new international mission to Hanoi.[223]

Yet again Wilson's need to appear active on the diplomatic front was given sanction by the Americans, and possibly in order to avoid further British dissociations, actively encouraged.[224]

Reaction to the Washington Visit

Wilson returned to London in time for England's victory in the World Cup Final and, as he himself admitted, 'the British reading and viewing public were not interested that weekend in international affairs'.[225] Nevertheless, on Saturday *The Times* reported on Wilson's 'pugilistic performance' and his 'confident tone' while in Washington and the Sunday newspapers were, as Castle noted in her diary, 'full of Harold's spectacular reception by Johnson in America'.[226] Henry Brandon in the *Sunday Times* described Wilson's public performance as 'truly impressive'.[227]

After the visit, Johnson sent a personal message to Wilson that was extremely warm in tone considering the previous month's difficulties.

> Thank you for coming my friend. We had a good talk. As you know, our friendship is a source of comfort and strength to me. I very much enjoyed your toast - and I meant what I said in mine. And I look forward to meeting with you again. Best wishes to you and your colleagues for a safe journey home. I wish you well in the difficult task which you and your Government

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[223] Ibid

[224] Record of a Discussion between the Prime Minister and Mr. Dean Rusk at the British Embassy, Washington, on 29 July 1966, PREM 13/1083, LBJL

[225] Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 344

[226] *The Times*, 30 July, 1966, p. 1; *Barbara Castle diaries*, 31 July, 1966, p. 80

[227] *Barbara Castle diaries*, 31 July 1966, p. 80

now face.[228]

Wilson reciprocated in equally friendly terms:

> I find it difficult to say how much out talks have heartened me at a time when life has not been altogether easy, there may still be rough weather ahead for both of us, but I have no doubt that, so long as we go on pulling together, it will work out all right in the end. Thank you so much for everything - and especially for your very kind message which Phil Kaiser had just given me.[229]

The British were perplexed at the warmth of the reception Wilson had received in Washington. In the week following it, Patrick Dean reported that the general feeling in Washington was that the visit 'was highly successful ... certainly more so than people had expected'.[230] He reported further that number of people had said

> how well the Prime Minister must have handled the President to have obtained such a satisfactory result and there is I think general pleasure on almost all sides that the close and friendly relations established during the Prime Minister's visit here last December have not only been preserved but strengthened.[231]

During a brief conversation with the President at the diplomatic reception for Luci Johnson's wedding, Johnson told Bruce how much he had enjoyed seeing the Prime Minister and what a useful meeting it had been. And, Jack Valenti, one of the President's closest advisers, also told Bruce that the President had said to him 'I really do like that man'. Rusk admitted to Bruce after the visit that he had been very surprised at the warmth of the toast proposed by the President at the lunch. Dean confided to Maclehose at the Foreign Office that Rusk's comments reflected 'a

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[228]Personal Telegram from Johnson to Prime Minister Wilson, PREM 13/1262, Received 30 July 1966

[229] Personal Telegram from the Prime Minister to the President, 30 July 1966, PREM 13/1262, PRO

[230] Letter from Dean to Maclehose, 3 August 1966, PREM 13/1262, PRO

[231] Ibid

report that the President's decision to line up so closely with the Prime Minister was only taken rather late in the day'.[232]

Dean attempted to explain the success of the visit, particularly 'why ... the President deployed such an exceptional effort to turn the visit into a major political and personal event'. Firstly, the President's 'instinctive friendliness' may have played a part.[233] And, combined with this, Wilson had been wise to keep the visit short considering how busy the Administration was. He believed 'one of the reasons ... the President likes doing business with the Prime Minister is that he can in a very short space of time talk to somebody who really knows his business and talks about what really matters'.[234] Secondly, Dean surmised that for purely selfish reasons it made sense for the Americans to 'reinforce international confidence in the Prime Minister and H.M.G. and, hence in sterling.'

> When there are already so many problems and so many unfriendly 'allies' all over the world, there is no point in seeing them increased by the political or economic demise of the only other Western country which exercises genuine worldwide responsibility, whatever they may feel about the relationship between the pound and the dollar.

Thirdly, and directly related to the situation in Vietnam, Dean believed that

> although the President must have known that he could not expect anything of major importance in the way of additional help or new commitments East of Suez, the negative aim of ensuring that H.M.G., whether now or later on, do not withdraw their general support for the United States over Vietnam and in relation to South East Asia generally, acquired an almost dramatic importance when the President reflected upon the potential consequences of Britain drifting seriously out of line.

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232 Ibid

233 Letter from Dean to Maclehose, 6 August 1966, PREM 13/1262

234 Letter from Dean to Maclehose, 3 August 1966, PREM 13/1262

The reason why the President came to this view was also explained by Dean:

> It may be that H.M.G.'s dissociation from the bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong and the position we took over arms supplies did more than just irritate the President at the time. Once the first annoyance had subsided they may actually have rattled him. On any careful calculation it is extremely important from the point of view of American standing with world opinion that the leading socialist-governed country in the world should support their objectives in South East Asia. The converse could be extremely damaging, not only internationally, but in domestic terms since American public opinion still has a latent sense of guilt which it is much easier to allay when the Administration can point to the moral and physical support of other countries for what the U.S. is trying to do in Vietnam.

This, of course, was received in London as evidence that Britain could influence Johnson and his policies. If Dean was right, and all the evidence seems to point that way, Britain still had some leverage in its relations with the United States.

And finally, Dean suggested the Johnson administration might have had a fit of compassion for, and empathy with, the British Government over its financial difficulties:

> As, is becoming more and more apparent, the Administration may be faced in the not-too-distant future with the need for fairly stringent economic measures to control the growing inflationary tendencies in the American economy stemming, in part, from the approach of full employment. The President may therefore see a strong vested interest in praising the Prime Minister's courage, endorsing H.M.G.'s economic policies and, of course, in the success of a programme of retrenchment which is going to hurt quite a large section of the British public.[235]

Dean concluded that the only way to understand Johnson's change of heart was to recognise that:

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[235] Ibid

underneath all the President's fair words ... there was a good deal of American self-interest in the whole exercise. Certainly the personal rapport between the President and the Prime Minister was reaffirmed and I have no doubt that the President genuinely enjoys seeing the Prime Minister and talking to him about their mutual problems. He also has admiration for the Prime Minister's power of exposition and conviction. In addition, the meeting brought out quite clearly that both the Americans and ourselves badly need each other ...[236]

If it was essential that both Britain and the United States make their interests coincide, as the Foreign Office responded to Dean, then Wilson's July visit went as well as could be expected. The United States was reassured to hear that Wilson was being firm on economic issues and that Britain intended, for the time being at least, to continue the 'joint effort' East of Suez. It was also relieved to hear that Wilson intended to continue to support the US's general policy in Vietnam, even if he reserved the right to disagree with some of the specifics. The US also believed that Britain could still increase its practical contribution to the fight in the South East Asia. Wilson and his colleagues came away from Washington not only with pandered egos but also with the feeling that the Americans still needed them, particularly on Vietnam, and that that strengthened their position on sterling. The tensions in Anglo-American relations that had been so severe in June, now appeared to have subsided. This was particularly timely as in the second half of 1966 events in Rhodesia preoccupied the British Government's foreign policy and London needed Washington's acquiescence and co-operation over this. At the same time, the United States continued its escalation of the war, and the unpopularity of the war continued to grow both at home and abroad. Consequently, although the Labour

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236 Ibid

Government had more pressing issues to deal with towards the end of 1966, plans for yet another peace initiative were under way.

CHAPTER 6

AUGUST 1966-FEBRUARY 1968: THE COLLAPSE OF THE UNDERSTANDINGS

With the Labour government's attention fixed on events in Rhodesia during the second half of 1966, very little of substance occurred in Anglo-American relations regarding Vietnam. These months were used by the British, however, to prepare the ground for another peace initiative in February 1967 involving Premier Kosygin of the Soviet Union. This latest move would not only end in ignominious failure but would also test the so-called special relationship to the extreme. By early 1967 the Johnson administration was beginning to face the prospect of a military stalemate in Vietnam, yet the President still wanted a negotiated settlement without major concessions and only after some indication of military progress. After the debacle of the Wilson-Kosygin initative, the British government was left to question the sincerity of the US desire for a diplomatic resolution of the conflict.

George Brown's Approach to Moscow, 22-25 November 1966

On Friday 12 August George Brown, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and former First Secretary of State and Minister of Economic Affairs replaced Michael Stewart as Foreign Secretary. Despite his suspicion that Wilson had engaged in 'unsavoury' deals with Johnson, he would nevertheless prove extremely sympathetic to the US cause in Vietnam. At the time of his appointment David Bruce accurately portrayed him as a 'staunch and useful supporter of major US policies' but admitted, 'the Foreign Office has never before been headed by such an unorthodox diplomat'.

Brown's reputation as a maverick politician and a hard drinker was well known in Washington. By the end of September Bruce noted that 'his abounding vitality, inquisitive absorption of briefs, informality, boisterousness, already amaze, inspire, or appall his staff, as they did those previously associated with him in official life'.[1]

Brown was determined to make his mark in his new position and almost immediately turned his attention to a new initiative on Vietnam. At the Labour Party Conference in Brighton on 6 October during the foreign affairs debate, the Foreign Secretary announced a new plan for a negotiated settlement on Vietnam.[2] Brown announced that a conference of all interested parties should be called as soon as possible and suggested the NLF or Vietcong could be represented at it. He argued that once the principle of a conference was established, the US should cease bombing North Vietnam, and stop introducing US forces and military supplies into Vietnam, while the North Vietnamese should cease despatching troops and military supplies to the South. He then put forward six main points for a negotiated political settlement that was based on free elections and the neutralization of North and South Vietnam.[3] This announcement was made partly to assuage the growing number of opponents of the Government's policy on Vietnam who had put forward critical composite resolutions at the conference. The Government's foreign policy motion, which was passed by a small margin, also stressed Britain's ability to act independently on

> The Government have generally supported the American position because they believe quite simply, that so long as Hanoi refused to

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1 Telegram from Bruce to Rusk , 26 September 1966, 'Subject: when George Brown Comes to Washington', Declassified Document Series

2 Report of the 65th Annual Conference of the Labour Party, Brighton, 3-7 October 1966, Transport House, Smith Square, London, SW1

3 Ibid

> negotiate, the alternative to continuing the struggle is to abandon the South Vietnamese to aggression. On the other hand it has been made clear that we would not support every U.S. action regardless of its nature; the Government have dissociated themselves from the bombing of oil installations at Hanoi and Haiphong.[4]

The Americans were not given advance warning of this plan.[5] However, they admitted it was 'largely consistent' with their present position in that it allowed for 'certain concessions to Hanoi to break the impasse', primarily the provision for the inclusion of the Viet Cong in any talks.[6] Still, Washington felt it 'regrettable' that Brown's formula had 'surfaced publicly' as it reduced Hanoi's ability to respond favourably. North Vietnam did indeed reject the proposal immediately as 'echoing previously discredited US "peace tricks"'.[7]

Nevertheless Brown hoped to discuss his plan further during his first trip to Washington as Foreign Secretary. The visit was scheduled for 14 October, as part of a visit to the UN General Assembly, and once again Johnson had to be persuaded that it was worth cultivating a friendship with a senior British politician. Ambassador Bruce felt Brown was worth the effort. He advised that it was 'wise to consolidate the goodwill he has always manifested toward Americans' and he was 'sure the President would enjoy the encounter with a politician so singular in deportment and speech'.[8] Johnson agreed to meet Brown and as expected Vietnam dominated the discussion between the President and the Foreign Secretary. As Mr. Gromyko, the

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4 Ibid. Carried 3,470,000 to 2,932,000 against.

5 Telegram from Bruce to Harriman 6 October 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210l, File: UK, Vol. IX, Cables, 8/66-1/67, LBJL

6Background Paper 'The Brown Proposal for A Negotiated Settlement On Vietnam', Visit of UK Foreign Secretary, George Brown, 12 October 1966, NSF, Country File, Europe & USSR, UK, Box 216, UK, Visit of FonSec Brown, 1 of 2, 10/14/66, LBJL

7 Ibid

8 Draft Memorandum of Conversation: President, Bruce, Brown & Dean, Subject: US-Soviet Relations; Viet-Nam, 14 October 1966, Declassified Document Series

Soviet Foreign Minister, was also in the United States for the session of the UN General Assembly and Brown was planning to visit Moscow at the end of November, the President stressed that in his talks with Gromyko, or with anyone else, Brown 'was perfectly free to commit the President to meet anywhere at any time if there seemed to be a reasonable prospect of solving the Viet-Nam problem.' Johnson also made it clear that although the US could not abandon its commitments to South Vietnam, he personally was 'most anxious' for the war to end as it overshadowed everything else.[9] The major importance of the Washington visit, as Brown confirmed in his memoirs, was that Washington authorized him to take a secret proposal, known as the 'Phase A-Phase B Formula', to the Russians on his forthcoming trip to Moscow.[10] This plan proposed secret measures of mutual de-escalation. The US would stop bombing and then take additional steps to de-escalate, on the prior understanding that this would be followed by similar acts of de-escalation on the part of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong.[11]

After meeting Gromyko in New York Brown reported back to the British cabinet that he sensed a softening of the Soviet position on a number of issues, 'though not as yet on Vietnam.'[12] Two weeks later the British acquired 'additional examples of [the] more friendly Russian style first revealed by Gromyko in New York last month'.[13] Premier Kosygin confirmed that he would accept Wilson's

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[9] Ibid

[10] Brown, *In My Way*, p. 142

[11] Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 4 November 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210, File: UK, Vol. IX, Cables, 8/66-1/67, LBJL

[12] Cabinet Minutes, 20 October 1966, CAB 128/41, PRO

[13] Ibid

invitation to visit London and agreed to a four or five day trip beginning 5 February.[14] Brown's visit to Moscow was also brought forward to 22 November.

On the evening of 6 November, Averell Harriman, US Ambassador for Peace, met the British Foreign Secretary to discuss his forthcoming talks with Gromyko in Moscow. This proved to be a very important meeting for Anglo-American relations, although not for reasons that were immediately apparent. Brown emphasised the role the British could play in influencing the Russians to mediate on Vietnam at a time when the Russians appeared to be signalling their intention to play a more active role on the negotiation front.´ The British Foreign Secretary was adamant that there was now 'strong evidence' of a Soviet 'desire to do business', quoting Kosygin's previous statement that he would not accept Wilson's invitation to come to London until such a visit would be 'fruitful'. [15] The British felt that they had managed to convince the Russians that the US desired peace and that they could have a 'critical influence' on the Russians in the next few months.

Brown's most 'emphatic point' at this meeting was, however, as Bruce put it, 'his desire for explicit, specific US guidance for use in Moscow'; Brown wanted to know the US position on such issues as the role of the NLF at any peace conference and the steps the US would regard as 'appropriate' from North Vietnam in response to a unilateral US cessation of bombing. The President had apparently told Brown that he might settle for 40% reciprocity from North Vietnam, rather than a 50/50 deal.[16] It was agreed that the Foreign Secretary should not urge the reconvening of a Geneva Conference, instead he should 'simply stress Soviet-UK responsibilities as

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[14] Ibid

[15] Telegram from Bruce to Harriman, 7 November 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210, File: UK, Vol. IX, Cables, 8/66-1/67, LBJL

[16] Ibid

co-Chairmen and explore ... possible first steps toward de-escalation of hostilities and secret talks'. Brown ended the meeting with Harriman by repeating his belief that he was going to Moscow for 'a straight bit of negotiation on a specific topic'. He then said something of which careful note was taken by the Americans. In what Bruce felt was a 'deliberate choice of words' Brown said any further escalation of bombing 'might well lose you the support of all your friends in Europe like me, who are trying to help'. Harriman said he would get Washington to provide Brown with 'ammunition' for his trip and that this would include information on the US Congressional election results and Vietnam, and explicit guidance for his talks in Moscow.[17]

In the event, the White House was not prepared to provide the British with full and advance notice of their own peace plans. At a meeting on 10 November, State Department officials met with Presidential advisers to consider what advice to give George Brown and Italian Ambassador to South Vietnam, Giovanni D'Orlandi. At the end of June 1966 a Polish representative of the I.C.C., Janus Lewandowski, contacted D'Orlandi to inform him he had met with Ho Chi Minh, General Giap and Premier Pham Van Dong and believed there was room for compromise in the North Vietnamese position. He believed Hanoi would begin negotiating if the US suspended its bombing campaign and allowed the NLF to take some part in the proceedings.[18] The key individuals present at the meeting – William Bundy, Averell Harriman and Chester Cooper – agreed that 'Brown's talks in Moscow offered better immediate possibilities than the D'Orlandi channel'.[19] At this stage the Americans

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17 Ibid

18 János Radványi, Delusion and Reality: Gambits, Hoaxes, and Diplomatic One-Upmanship in Vietnam (Indiana: Gateways Editions, 1978), p. 193

19 Memorandum of a Meeting in FRUS, Vol. IV, p. 822

were not convinced that D'Orlandi's contact was operating under instructions from his own government and so the meeting decided to 'concentrate on what we could give to Brown'.[20] Harriman thought after material for Brown had been prepared, 'we should see what morsels could be given to D'Orlandi'.[21] William Bundy's main concern was if Phase A-Phase B was accepted and 'Hanoi took significant reciprocal action and we then suspended the bombing, pressures would quickly build up for us to stop troop re-inforcements as well'. And, as Cooper reminded the meeting, Brown had publicly announced his own plan calling for 'a bombing pause plus no-reinforcements in exchange for an end to infiltration'. Bundy 'agreed that ending U.S. troop re-inforcement seemed to figure prominently in Brown's thinking and came high on his timetable'. For that reason Bundy observed that the US 'had to be careful about how far' it went with Brown, 'we would not want to make substantial concessions before Hanoi was even at the negotiating table'.[22] Still, Bundy thought it right 'to give Brown something to contribute to the value of his talks. Though he was not a discreet man he was well intentioned and capable and was a good friend to the US'.[23] Although there was some scepticism regarding the Soviets' interest in a role as intermediary, Harriman concluded that they 'might be interested in trying out some ideas in their talks with Brown' and therefore they 'should not conclude in advance that nothing constructive would emerge'. Noticeably, Harriman noted that, 'furthermore, our relations with the British would suffer a damaging blow if the British government were to conclude that we were not serious about reaching a negotiated settlement in Vietnam'. It was agreed that the US 'should give Brown

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20 Ibid, p. 821
21 Ibid, p. 823
22 Ibid, p. 822
23 Ibid, p. 822-23

enough to work with to satisfy him but obviously should not give away our position'.[24]

At this stage Chester Cooper, an NSC staff member, outlined US plans for peace, and Brown's part in them, in a memo to Harriman a few days later.[25] The Americans clearly felt that Brown's visit to Moscow just one month before Christmas, when another bombing pause might take place, was significant and a pause might be all-important in determining the success or failure of the visit. However, they would not let the British know their definite plans regarding the prospects of a Christmas bombing pause. This may have been because they felt it was not worth risking a leak at this stage but it may also have been that ultimately they did not trust the British to represent them adequately. So, Brown was advised to tell the Russians that a bombing pause was likely on the grounds of 'precedent, rumor and reason' but that he had no advance knowledge of this. He was also to stress that if there was a pause, time was of the essence. The pause would be short due to Johnson's limited patience and would be the last one. Hanoi and Moscow ought to begin 'contingency planning' immediately. In terms of what the US would consider an appropriate response to US cessation of bombing, the President would want 'some credible and discernible reaction' in order to keep the pause going, such as '(1) an immediate stopping of southbound truck traffic … (2) an immediate and substantial decline in the level of Communist military action and terror in the South.' If this happened, the US would be prepared to move to either public or private discussions with Hanoi, bilaterally or multilaterally. They were also prepared to do

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24 Ibid, p. 823

25 *Memorandum from Governor Harriman to Chester Cooper*, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210, File: UK, Vol. IX, Memos 8/66-1/67, LBJL

this at short notice 'perhaps during January before Kosygin's visit to London and before Tet.'[26] It was envisaged that the Wilson-Kosygin talks could be used to set up a more formal Geneva-type conference.

Unfortunately, during Brown's visit to Moscow both Gromyko and Kosygin continued their hard line on Vietnam, stressing that any negotiations on Vietnam had to be understood and arranged in light of the US position as the aggressor. And, although Brown presented the Phase A-Phase B proposal to Gromyko, both verbally and on paper, the Soviets argued that there was 'nothing new' in this and therefore they had 'no new opinions' to express.[27] Nevertheless Brown informed Rusk that Kosygin had characterised their discussions as 'very useful' and that he felt the meeting had still been worthwhile not least because he had improved his 'already sympathetic' relationship with Gromyko and 'had established himself on amiable terms with Kosygin'.[28] Also, although Brown had said he was acting in a personal capacity, without the authorization of the United States, he passed on to Kosygin, Johnson's comment that if the Soviets could help, the British Foreign Secretary could say that he knew he could deliver his friend.[29] Brown reported back to the Cabinet that the Soviet Government 'no longer maintained a wholly negative attitude on a number of major international issues' and that on Vietnam 'the tone of the discussion was less harsh' even if the position was still the same.[30] The British would shortly

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[26] Ibid

[27] Record of a Meeting between the Foreign Secretary and the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR in the Kremlin, Moscow, at 10.30 am, on 25 November 1966, Visit of the Foreign Secretary to the Soviet Union 22-25 November 1966, Annex, PREM 13/1917, PRO

[28] Cable from Bromley Smith to the President, 26 November 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210, File: UK, Vol. IX, Memos 8/66-1/67; From Bruce to Rusk, 27 November 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210, File: UK, Vol. IX, Cables, 8/66-1/67, LBJL

[29] Record of a Meeting between the Foreign Secretary and the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR in the Kremlin, Moscow, at 10.30 am, on 25 November 1966, Visit of the Foreign Secretary to the Soviet Union 22-25 November 1966, Annex, PREM 13/1917, PRO

[30] Cabinet Minutes, 1 December 1966, CAB 128/41, PRO

discover why the Russians had not appeared interested in Brown's rendition of Phase A-Phase B.

Christmas Truce 1966

From the end of November, Wilson had been under pressure at home to press Johnson for another bombing truce. The war in Vietnam continued unabated and between 2-6 December the US carried out a series of bombing raids on military targets in the immediate vicinity of Hanoi, the first in the area since the POL installations were attacked in the summer. Although the targets were considered by the Americans to be legitimate military ones, such as truck depots, rail yards and fuel storage dumps, the possibility of mass civilian casualties alarmed much of world opinion. The air raids were further escalated on 13 and 14 December when US bombers targetted the Hanoi area. The Soviet Union responded by accusing the US of bombing residential sections of the city. Although Washington officially denied this, the suspicion remained that the likelihood of civilian casualties through stray missiles was high. The public outcry in Britain was greater than ever. Fifty-five members of Parliament sent a cable to Johnson expressing their grave concern at the successive bombing attacks on Hanoi and the 'resultant loss of life among the civilian population' and asking that these attacks be stopped in the 'interest of world peace.'[31] Donald Murray of the British Foreign Office reported to the British Embassy in Washington on 16 December that the 'head of steam' over the Hanoi bombing had become 'very serious indeed' and requested further information on the

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[31] Telegram to the President 15 December 1966, EXCO305, United Kingdom 1/1/65, Box 76, CO305, 11/4/66-6/14/67

raids in order to prepare an official statement that Brown could deliver in the House of the Commons.[32] Wilson was pressed to dissociate Britain from the American 'bombing of schools, hospitals and population centers' as Labour MPs put it in the House.[33] Bruce also suggested that Rusk, who was in Paris for the latest NATO meeting, should do a background press briefing on the bombing to try to deal with the emerging public relations disaster. The original material sent to London by the State Department had in the words of one US official, been 'god-awful'.[34] By refusing to provide a specific rationale for the attacks and by not providing sufficient detail on the target areas, the Americans were not helping themselves, or their allies to deal with the flak they would undoubtedly receive as a result of such incidents. Matters were made worse a few days later by the publication of press reports from Harrison Salisbury in the *New York Times* describing civilian casualties in North Vietnam from the latest wave of US air attacks. The official presentation of the air raids as surgical attacks on military targets was increasingly difficult to sustain as Salisbury reported at length that several towns and cities had been hit with resultant civilian casualties.

In the event Brown had little choice but to respond to such criticism of the bombing of Hanoi with the now standard Government response: he blamed the North Vietnamese for 'prolonging the fighting', assured the House that the US was only attacking military targets, and reiterated the urgent need to establish peace negotiations.[35] Bruce judged Brown's performance to be 'smooth and authoritative'

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[32] Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 16 December 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Vol. IX, Cables, 8/66-1/67, Box 210, LBJL

[33] Hansard, 19 February 1965, Vol.706, Col. 254

[34] Memo for Mr. Rostow from Richard M. Moose, 16 December 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Vol. IX, Memos, 8/66-1/67, LBJL

[35] Ibid & Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 20 December 1966, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210, File: UK, Vol. IX, Cables, 8/66-1/67, LBJL

and credited the Foreign Secretary with effectively lessening the outcry over the bombing.[36] Wilson and Brown were also fortunate in that the Parliamentary recess for Christmas was about to begin and news of Rhodesian sanctions had hit the headlines.

Aware of the growing unrest in Britain over the bombing, Washington knew it was essential that the British Government's resolve not waver. Although not a priority issue, the White House and State Department worried about further British dissociations in the light of the bombings. Strangely, members of the Johnson administration adopted a quixotic response to this concern. Rusk's patience with the British was running out and the President obviously shared the same view. Reporting back on his NATO meeting, the Secretary of State told the President that he had given the Council some 'old-time religion' on Vietnam and that this pressure might result in more allied assistance on a bilateral basis, particularly from Germany and the Netherlands. In relation to Britain, Rusk said he had hit George Brown 'pretty hard' on their joint SEATO commitment in face of 'the common danger' in Vietnam.[37] He further commented, 'I intend to press them very hard for more participation but they will probably act like scared rabbits in the face of their domestic political situation.'[38] Even at this late stage, Rusk remained dissatisfied at the British commitment on Vietnam.

The following day the President met at the Ranch to discuss Vietnam with some of his key civilians advisers, including Secretary McNamara, Walt Rostow, Ambassador Harriman and Ambassador Lodge. Lodge reported that progress had

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36 Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 20 December 1966 8/66-1/67

37 Personal Telegram from Rusk to the President, 16 December 1966, Declassified Document Series

38 Ibid

been made on third country participation but more could be made. However, he thought the US had 'reached the limit of generating such assistance by exhortation'. Again, Britain was specifically mentioned. Lodge said the US could use the kind of British policemen who had worked in Kenya and suggested, 'we ought to pressure the British to get some -- perhaps by holding up shipments of scotch whiskey to the U.S.'.[39]

While Rusk and others were still determined to press the British towards a deeper involvement in Vietnam, they also recognised that Wilson needed to be encouraged to maintain his present level of support for the President. Patrick Dean had separate meetings with Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow and Averell Harriman and reported their views back to the Foreign Office.[40] According to Dean, Rusk said 'it was highly unpopular for the Americans to have to go on alone and that was why the political support of the British Government was so valuable' and reiterated that 'South East Asia and the attitude of foreign governments to the war in Vietnam mattered by far the most to the U.S. Government'.[41] Ambassador Harriman also

> wished to make it clear that if governments who were not directly engaged in Vietnam wished to retain influence with the President, who would be under continuous and increasing strain from the hawks to spread and intensify the war, it was most important that these governments should not 'dissociate' themselves from the President. 'Dissociation' was in any case an unfortunate word and had had an unfortunate effect. If outside governments felt that they could not approve any action the U.S. might take they should use expressions like 'they did not see the necessity for such and such an action.' Those who dissociated themselves from the President could not expect to

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[39] Meeting with the President, Friday, 17 December, 1966, Austin, Texas, NSF, Files of Walt Rostow, Box 3, Meeting 17 December, 1966, (Vietnam; NATO; UN etc), LBJL

[40] Letter from Sir Patrick Dean to Sir Paul Gore-Booth, 28 December 1966, PREM 13/1917; Two letters from Sir Patrick Dean to Sir Paul Gore-Booth, 29 December 1966, PREM 13/1917, PRO

[41] Letter from Sir Patrick Dean to Sir Paul Gore-Booth, 28 December 1966, PREM 13/1917, PRO

have much influence with him.[42]

Harriman reminded Dean that by and large outside the White House the President was under pressure from hawks and therefore 'those who were in favour of moderation should ... seek to preserve their influence with the President and the best way of doing so was to sympathise with and support him'. Although never more than token resistance, Congressional disaffection had been evident since January 1966 when Senator William Fulbright presided over the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on the war. However, Johnson not only faced criticism from opponents of the war; he also faced a small group centred around Senator John Stennis and the Senate Armed Service Committee. This group wanted to end the war by winning it through stronger action. Johnson continued to face countervailing pressures in Congress for the duration of the Administration. Nevertheless, at this point, the 'hawks' had the upper hand because of the approaching 1968 Presidential election. Johnson was well aware that Democratic losses during the 1966 Congressional elections were largely due to questions surrounding his own credibility on the war, and his handling of it.[43] The President was well aware that he would find it extremely difficult to achieve re-election without a satisfactory resolution of the war, or at the very least, some indication that the war was being successfully prosecuted. Nevertheless, at this stage Harriman reassured Dean that there were

no signs at all the President was going to take any rash

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[42] Letter from Sir Patrick Dean to Sir Paul Gore-Booth, 29 December 1966, PREM 13/1917, PRO

[43] Although the Democrats retained a large majority in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, the party had sustained 47 losses in the House and 3 in the Senate. Before the 1966 elections the position had been 295-140 in the House and 68-32 in the Senate, after it the majority was reduced to 248-187 and 64-36 See Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 338-9

> action in the near future. On the contrary, he would resist pressures for this for as long as he could, but he needed the support of world opinion and above all of the British government. This meant a very great deal both to the U.S. Administration and to the President personally.[44]

But to complicate the picture, although probably reflecting Johnson's uncertainty about the best way forward, Rostow told Dean that the President was 'personally disinclined to adopt a soft line toward the North Vietnamese'. He also stressed that although the US was still committed to the fight in Vietnam, it was also ready to find peace and were 'encouraging all contenders for the peace prize'.[45]

Fearing further Parliamentary anger over US bombings, Dean highlighted in his letters to London the fact that all three men had expressed appreciation of the British support on Vietnam and hoped that:

> if the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State feel that they cannot actually continue to support U.S. policy, they will take account of Harriman's warning when formulating any statement. [46]

This advice was heeded; the British would not dissociate themselves from the bombing.

Parallel Peace Efforts - From Marigold to Sunflower

According to William Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Eastern affairs, by the end of 1966 the Johnson administration, and in particular the President, had decided to take peace talks more seriously. If this was the case, then

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[44] Ibid

[45] Letter from Sir Patrick Dean to Sir Paul Gore-Booth, 29 December 1966, PREM 13/1917, PRO

[46] Letter from Sir Patrick Dean to Sir Paul Gore-Booth, 30 December 1966, PREM 13/1917, PRO

LBJ and his staff mishandled many of the tentative contacts between their representatives and North Vietnamese officials.

The British decided to try another tack on the peace front as George Brown came up with another initiative. On 30 December, Brown sent a confidential cable simultaneously to the Governments of the United States, North Vietnam and South Vietnam. In it he proposed a three-way meeting to 'arrange the cessation of hostilities'.[47] Brown offered the services of Her Majesty's Government to facilitate such a meeting and said that, if desired, the meeting could take place on British territory. He suggested the facilities at Britain's base in Hong Kong. Hanoi rejected the proposal. This response was especially predictable considering the fact that the Chinese had two days earlier charged that Hong Kong was being used as a base for aircraft carriers whose planes were bombing North Vietnam. American journalist, Harrison Salisbury put this down to either 'incredible bumbling' on Brown's part or suggested it was a measure aimed at appeasing those baying for the Labour Party to take action to end the war.[48] It could have been both. The Americans formally welcomed Brown's proposal and Johnson repeated his position that the United States was 'ready to meet anywhere, any time that Hanoi is willing to come to a conference table'.[49]

Just a few days later, however, the British were to hear some disturbing news from the Americans. Rusk informed London on 4 January that during the previous six months, the Poles had been negotiating with the North Vietnamese with the agreement of the United States government. Rusk had been forced into this

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47 Telegram from Foreign Office to British Embassy, Hanoi, 30 December 1966, PREM 13/1917, PRO

48 Harrison Salisbury, *Behind the Lines - Hanoi*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 230

49 Telegram from Rusk to Bruce , 13 January 1967, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210, File: UK, Vol. IX, Cables, 8/66-1/67, LBJL

admission by the fact that Harrison Salisbury had had discussions with Britain's Consul in Hanoi, John Colvin about his exchanges with North Vietnamese ministers.[50] Salisbury told Colvin that from his discussions with the Prime Minister of North Vietnam, Pham Van Dong, he thought the North Vietnamese 'had gone further than ever before, and that if there were any receptivity in United States Administration there were grounds for further exploration'.[51]

Not surprisingly the British were alarmed and disheartened by this revelation. It told Wilson, Brown and the Foreign Office three things. First, that the Americans were being far from frank with them regarding their attempts to find peace. Second, that Washington had been prepared to let Brown go to Moscow ill-informed. And third, that the chances of the latest discussions with Hanoi coming to anything were compromised by the fact the latest intermediary was a journalist whose temptation would be to publish an account of his discussions with Premier Pham Van Dong rather maintain the required silence.

Still, the Polish peace effort, code-named 'Marigold' in Washington, did suggest the North Vietnamese were looking to negotiate. The Marigold affair reveals a great deal about the negotiating stance of the United States and their apparent ineptitude in diplomacy on Vietnam.

In November the US showed serious interest in the D'Orlandi/Lewandowski channel, at which point Ambassador Lodge allowed the Polish diplomat to pass on the US position regarding a final solution to the current stalemate to the authorities in Hanoi. This included Rusk's fourteen points, the statement of the Manila conference (24-25 October, 1966) that American troops would withdraw from Vietnam within

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50 Top Secret Report on Vietnam for the Prime Minister, 4 January 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

51 Telegram from British Embassy, Hanoi to Foreign Office, 4 January 1967, PREM 13/1917

six months of a peace settlement (on condition that the North Vietnamese would also withdraw from the South), and the Phase A-Phase B formula that Brown had also taken to Moscow in November. On November 30 Lewandowski returned to Saigon from Hanoi to report to Lodge on his meeting with the North Vietnamese. On 1 December he told the US Ambassador that he was authorized to tell the American government: 'If the U.S. is really of the view which I have presented, it would be advisable to confirm them directly by conversation with the North Vietnamese ambassador in Warsaw'.[52] A direct contact was on the cards. However, the State Department scrutinised Lewandowski's version of the American position presented to Hanoi, only to find that he had neglected to include the details of the de-escalatory Phase A-Phase B formula. Lewandowski said that it had been presented orally. Washington decided to pursue this lead telling Lewandowski that their Ambassador in Warsaw, Gronouski would be in contact with the North Vietnamese Embassy on December 6 or soon afterwards. At the same time, however, Lodge added that the Ten Points Lewandowski had presented only broadly reflected the U.S. position and that 'several specific points were subject to important differences of interpretation'.[53] Adam Rapacki, the Polish Foreign Minister, intervened at this point and warned that any American intensification of the bombing campaign would destroy the possibility of a contact through Warsaw, expressing deep concern at any re-interpretation of the Ten Points. The Polish attempt at mediation ended when the US stepped up its bombing campaign on 13 December attacking a railroad yard and vehicle depot near Hanoi for the second time in 10 days.[54] Four days later, Wilfred Burchett, an

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[52] Telegram from Lodge, American Embassy in Vietnam to Rusk, 1 December 1966, in FRUS, Vol. IV, p. 893

[53] Radványi, Delusion and Reality, p. 197

[54] Ibid, p. 198

Australian communist journalist with close ties to the North Vietnamese leadership, told US officials in Paris that the DRV had had an official en route to Warsaw 'when the US resumed bombing Hanoi'.[55] Rapacki informed Gronouski that Hanoi had requested that the Poles end their mediation to arrange a direct contact between the Governments of North Vietnam and the United States and said that 'the whole responsibility for losing this chance of a peaceful solution to the Vietnam War rested on the United States government'.[56] The United States tried one desperate attempt to restart the exchanges by stopping the bombing within a ten-mile radius of Hanoi. The Poles again contacted Hanoi but to no avail. Despite US protestations that the Hanoi bombing targets had been decided upon months before, Moscow, Poland and Hanoi were left with the impression that Washington preferred a military solution.

Brown was furious at Rusk's cable telling of the Polish peace efforts. In a cable designated 'flash' traffic, Brown replied tersely:

> Thank you for this information. But, though I realise your difficulties, I must say I wish you had told me of this before I went to Moscow. To put it mildly a very valuable opportunity may have been lost. It is not surprising that the Russians were so puzzled... If a further opportunity arises I am sure you will keep me fully in the picture.[57]

Not surprisingly, this latest revelation prompted a flurry of discussions in Downing Street and the Foreign Office. Reporting on the matter to the Prime Minister on 4 January 1967, Michael Palliser commented that Rusk's telegram was 'disheartening' as it revealed 'a disconcerting lack of frankness with us by the Americans'.

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55 George C. Herring (Ed.), *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volume of the Pentagon Papers* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1983), p. 370

56 Radványi, *Delusion and Reality*, p. 198/199

57 Flash Telegram from Foreign Office to Dean, 4 January 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

Moreover, Palliser felt 'the gravity of this failure by the Americans to keep us informed (however valid the reasons given by Rusk; and the validity seems at best questionable) is compounded by the fact that they let the Foreign Secretary go to Moscow from November 22-25 without knowing what was going on between them and the Poles'. He elaborated further on the perception the Russians may have received during Brown's visit and hinted that this had been a lost opportunity:

> Since the Polish representative in Saigon (Lewandowski) got the message wrong and was in fact conveying to Hanoi an inaccurate summary of the American position (omitting in particular the two-phase agreement under which U.S. bombing would have stopped provided there was clear advance agreement about subsequent action by Hanoi) at precisely the same time as the Foreign Secretary was in Moscow giving the Russians an accurate account of the American position, it is not surprising the Russians (who pretty clearly had been informed of what was going on) seemed puzzled by the Foreign Secretary's exposition and pressed him very closely on it. Since it did not correspond with what Lewandowski was explaining to Hanoi they may have concluded that the Foreign Secretary did not, despite what he said, enjoy full American confidence - which seems regrettably to have been true - or alternatively that the two-phase agreement was his own bright idea and had no American backing.[58]

Washington's decision to keep the British deliberately in the dark on this matter, was probably made in the genuine belief that the less third parties knew about the Polish contact, the less likelihood of leaks and therefore failure. Certainly Hanoi and the Polish government had requested absolute secrecy.[59] If this was the case, however, the Americans would have saved British blushes had they not given Brown the Phase A-Phase B proposal.

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[58] Top Secret Report from Michael Palliser to Prime Minister, 4 January 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

[59] Telegram from the Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State, 1 December 1966, FRUS, Vol. IV, p.891

Wilson asked to see Bruce to discuss the exchanges between Rusk and Brown over the Polish contact. According to the record of conversation the Prime Minister spoke firmly on the matter, saying it 'raised a major issue of confidence in relations between the Foreign Secretary and himself and the President and Mr. Rusk'. The Prime Minister said he had been 'disturbed' at what had happened, that Brown had been 'placed in an impossible situation for his talks in Moscow' and that those talks may have proved 'counter-productive' with the Russians. Not only did Wilson express his dissatisfaction that the Poles knew what was going and Brown didn't, but also that he thought it 'even more unacceptable' that the Italians also 'knew the facts' when they had no 'need to know', whereas the Foreign Secretary 'who had to deal with "some of the toughest eggs in the business" did not'.[60] He felt that the Foreign Secretary's message to Rusk over this had in fact been 'relatively temperate' and things were more serious than this implied. Wilson was keen to ensure that this should not happen again, especially given Kosygin's planned visit to London early in February, arguing that 'it was essential, before he came, the United States Government should have put the British Government completely in the picture without holding anything back'. To this end, the Prime Minister requested that Chester Cooper be sent to London to fully brief himself and the Foreign Secretary. Cooper was considered someone who would not attract too much media attention, and lead to speculation that the British Government was being briefed or indeed being given instructions before the visit.[61]

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60 Record of Conversation between the Prime Minister and the United States Ambassador at No. 10 Downing Street at 12.10 pm on Tuesday, 10 January, 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

61 Ibid

Bruce gallantly tried to defend the US position, stressing he had not known what was happening with the Poles and that this in itself was proof that 'this was all being kept very close'. The Prime Minister reminded Bruce that the situation was 'similar' to one that happened the previous year, when it was only as a result of his own pressure that Mr. Goldberg, US Ambassador at the UN had been sent to London to brief Wilson on the 'peace offensive' and that 'without that exchange, the British Government would not have been as well informed as they should be'.[62]

Wilson was not content to leave things at that; instead he told Bruce that 'the broader question of confidence must be raised with the President at some point.' Wilson emphasized the serious pressure he would be under once Parliament reassembled but said 'there was no question of this affecting the Government's general attitude' and assuring Brown that they had no intention of dissociating from the US Government on Vietnam. He did admit, however, that Harrison Salisbury's articles had made a big impact and that public opinion in Britain generally was growing ever more critical of the US Government. For this reason, although he felt he 'could hold the position', he believed that 'the general Anglo-American relationship' was bound to come under greater strain 'and this made even more intolerable the American failure to keep us in the picture over the Vietnam exchanges with the Poles'. As was now usual, Wilson discussed with Bruce the merits of sending a personal message to the President. At first Bruce suggested he 'get some illumination' on the Polish discussions before Wilson did this and obviously inferred that it might even be best if the Prime Minister left such a discussion until their next face-to-face meeting. Bruce emphasized the President's many difficulties at home.

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62 Ibid

Wilson replied that although he recognised that Johnson was 'going through a tough period' and he would not let a friend down at such a time, their working relationship must become more of a partnership 'in things that mattered'. Indeed, he fired that 'this kind of thing must not happen again or he would go personally direct to the President.' At this point Bruce said he thought Wilson should contact the President via a short message expressing how seriously he took the matter.[63]

Wilson's advisers worked on a draft message later that day. In it Wilson repeated his serious concern over the Polish discussions and Brown's 'equivocal position' while in Moscow, expressing his doubts that Britain would have been informed at all had it not been for Harrison Salisbury. He repeated that it was essential that there be 'complete frankness' before Kosygin's visit.[64] The draft went further talking of 'the key' to their 'whole relationship' being 'mutual support and counsel' and a 'concept of partnership' based on 'total confidence between us. I am bound in all honesty to say that, in the present case, this confidence seems to me to have been lacking: and I wanted you to know how gravely I view such a situation.'[65]

Wilson, as with previous angry draft messages, changed his mind and two days later sent a brief and somewhat mellower message to the President as follows:

> I want you to know that, as I have told David Bruce privately, I am seriously concerned at a matter which is, I think, pretty fundamental to our relationship. David will of course be reporting about it but, as I told him, I feel that I should send you this personal word about it. Best regards.[66]

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63 Ibid

64 Secret and Personal. Draft Message to the President from the Prime Minister. 2nd Draft. 10 January 1967, PREM 13/1917

65 Ibid

66 Immediate Foreign Office to Dean, 12 January 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

This did not mean, however, that London had relaxed over the issue. On the contrary, a reply from Rusk to Brown's cable enflamed British sensitivities. The Secretary of State argued that,

> there was nothing on which we could have informed you prior to your visit to Moscow. Your visit came at the time of Lewandowski's visit to Hanoi but before we had any information whatever from him on his visit ... In fact, we gave you for your trip a major concession to the other side in the form of a two-phased proposal in which we would stop the bombing if they would agree that subsequently there could be a de-escalation of the violence. I am sorry if there has been any mis-understanding on this point.[67]

Brown apparently found this statement 'disappointingly disingenuous' and although he decided to continue the exchange with Rusk, did ask Murray Maclehose to write to Patrick Dean explaining the nature of Brown's grievance. Dean could then pass this on to Bill Bundy.[68] Maclehose explained:

> We do not want an argument, but the State Department must not be allowed to pass off the impropriety of this action in this way. They must realise that the Secretary of State's message to Rusk was based on very serious considerations.[69]

Maclehose privately hoped that the Russians had understood what had happened in November.

> In the long run, and after they had time to check it all up (and no doubt to grill Lewandowski) they have probably got it all straight now, and realised that Lewandowski muffed it, and the Secretary of State got it right. Perhaps as a result of this belated realisation the Secretary of State's stock may even

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67 Letter from Dean Rusk to George Brown, No Date, PREM 13/1917, PRO

68 Top Secret Letter from C.M. Maclehose to Sir Patrick Dean, 11 January 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

69 Ibid

> have risen rather than the reverse in Moscow, and the extent of the generous concession which he conveyed may have got through.

Notwithstanding this glimmer of hope, Maclehose concluded that 'the risk which the Americans ran, both to their own interests and to the Secretary of State's reputation, by their lack of frankness, strikes us as amazing'.[70]

The following day, when Brown addressed the British cabinet, he reported that the chances of resolving the conflict in Vietnam were 'slightly more hopeful than hitherto' even if they remained 'confused and uncertain'. He reassured his colleagues that the Government was continuing to 'promote some form of mediation between the parties to the dispute' via both public and private discussions. Perhaps bending to pressure from within the Party, Brown admitted that the British Government 'must continue to deplore the United States bombing of North Vietnam' but argued, as the Americans had pressed him to, that it would be

> impolitic to dissociate ourselves from United States policy, especially since we had reason to believe that the United States President, although determined not to expose United States prestige to a rebuff, was continuing to resist pressure within his Administration for the adoption of more extreme military measures against North Vietnam.[71]

Chester Cooper was despatched to London to try to smooth the waters by briefing the Prime Minister on the latest developments on Vietnam. When he met with Brown and Wilson on 18 January, the Prime Minister's sensitivities regarding the Polish affair were still apparent. Cooper tried to appease him over this, explaining that,

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[70] Ibid

[71] Cabinet Minutes, 12 January 1967, CAB 128/42 Pt. 1

> the President was in a 'psychotic' state about leaks not only in regard to top secret matters such as these but over anything that he wished to keep confidential; this was why there had been a 'clamp-down' on security about the exchanges.[72]

Wilson and Cooper then concentrated on the Kosygin visit. Cooper elaborated on the latest contacts with the Russians and reported that Washington now understood that if there was to be a settlement, Hanoi wanted advance notice of what 'package' would be available before committing itself to talks. The American Ambassador in Moscow, Llewelyn Thompson would soon be informing the Russians of this change in the US position and would also confirm that Washington accepted that the NLF could be involved in any discussions. Cooper also confirmed that a draft 'package settlement' had now been written and that it was envisaged that a basic understanding be agreed between Hanoi and Washington before holding an international conference to ratify the secret agreement. Cooper presented this information as top secret, noting that as only four people in the State Department knew of it, 'there were now more people on this side of the Atlantic who were fully in the picture of the current United States approach to Vietnam than in the United States itself'. [73] This emphasis on absolute secrecy was, of course, necessary to preserve the chances of a private deal being negotiated. It was also, as Cooper had stressed regarding the Polish affair, the result of Johnson's growing paranoia.

Wilson pressed Cooper to emphasise to Washington not only the desirability of a Tet truce but also that the pause in the bombing of North Vietnam should last for the duration of the entire Kosygin visit. Again, Wilson suggested reinforcing

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[72] Secret. Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and Mr. Chester Cooper in the Prime Minister's Room in the House of Commons at 6.00 pm on 18 January 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

[73] Ibid

Cooper's points by sending a message to the President. When Cooper said it was best to wait and see whether Washington were amenable to the Prime Minister's views, Wilson said he would not send an immediate message.[74] In the end, Wilson trusted Cooper to do the job and merely responded to Johnson's reply to Wilson's telegram on the Polish affair. Wilson thanked Johnson for the 'admirably full briefing' he and George Brown had received from Cooper, and said he felt they were 'now fully in possession of the facts.' He also asked that Cooper pay another visit, immediately prior to the Kosygin visit.

Kosygin's Visit to London - 6-13 February 1967

By the end of January, the United States suspected Hanoi was seeking a settlement in Vietnam. In addition to coming close to establishing direct contact with North Vietnam during the Polish affair, a number of indirect contacts indicated some movement in North Vietnam. By the beginning of February, three journalists had had separate interviews with senior North Vietnamese officials that suggested Hanoi had changed its formula for establishing peace. Harrison Salisbury's interview with Pham Van Dong had been followed on 28 January by an interview between William Burchett, an experienced Australian communist journalist, and the Foreign Minister of North Vietnam Nguyen Duy Trinh, during which Trinh appeared to abandon the four points as a pre-requisite of any peace settlement, instead indicating there 'could' be talks if the US stopped bombing. This statement marked the first time that Hanoi had 'directly addressed the possibility of an official dialogue

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74 Record of Conversation between Prime Minister and Cooper, 18 January 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

between North Vietnamese and Americans'.[75] Moreover, Trinh had modified the condition that a bombing halt should be 'final and unconditional' to 'unconditional' only. A meeting between Robert Kennedy and officials of the French Foreign Office on 31st January seemed to confirm that this was Hanoi's official policy. This movement in Hanoi's position was underscored by the publication of Trinh's interview in North Vietnamese newspapers, including the party journal Nhan Dan, indicating that Hanoi was preparing its own public for talks of some kind.[76] These private contacts appeared more portentous in light of recent statements on North Vietnamese radio indicating that there might be a willingness in Hanoi to negotiate.

Also on 20 January an interview between Gloria Stewart and Nguyen Van Hieu, the NLF's 'foreign minister' was published in the *New Statesman.*[77] The Vietcong's settlement aims appeared to differ from North Vietnam's 'four points'. Apparently, Hieu said to Stewart that the NLF was willing to 'begin preliminary talks directly with America - without conditions' and argued that the NLF was not wedded to the idea of establishing the same political system as the North.[78] Clearly, at the very least, there were discussions on possible peace terms taking place amongst the Vietnamese nationalists.

In the lead up to the Wilson-Kosygin talks, the British Foreign Office liased closely with the British Embassy in Washington and with Chester Cooper to ensure that the US Government kept Wilson and Brown fully abreast of the latest developments. The British would not be 'put into bat', a second time without

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75 Chester Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1990), p. 351

76 Record of First Formal Meeting Held at 10 Downing Street at 4.30 pm on Monday, 6 February, 1967, PREM 13/1840, PRO

77 Gloria Stewart, 'What the Vietcong Really Want', New Statesman, 20 January 1967, pp. 69/70

78 Ibid

adequate protection and without knowing the score.[79] By the end of January, less than a week before Kosygin was due to arrive in London, Brown was pressing Cooper for 'any additional information on American thinking on Vietnam'.[80] He was particularly concerned to learn whether Thompson had spoken to the leadership in Moscow about the latest US position, and whether the Americans could comment on the conversation between the journalist William Burchett and Pham Van Dong. As already noted Burchett's report of the talk indicated that the North Vietnamese might be trying to make contact via a communist country.[81] Three days before Kosygin's visit, Chester Cooper arrived in London in response to Wilson's request to be fully briefed on these latest developments in Vietnam diplomacy. Although Cooper had originally intended to return to Washington before Wilson's talks with Kosygin began, the Prime Minister asked that Cooper remain in England so that he could 'serve as link between London and Washington in the event there were substantive discussions on Vietnam'. As Cooper put it 'it was by no means clear that such discussions were likely' but he stayed on just the same.[82] Cooper, representing Washington's views, told Wilson that these latest contacts

> sounded rather less forthcoming than what tended to be read into the public statements of the North Vietnamese. Their present line was not apparently that, if the Americans would stop bombing, they would then be willing to talk seriously about negotiation; but simply that, if this happened, they would be prepared to listen to what the Americans thereafter had to propose; which implied that stopping the bombing would not be enough in itself to produce a real dialogue.[83]

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79 Top Secret Letter from C. M. Maclehose to Sir Patrick Dean, 11 January 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

80 Immediate Telegram from Rusk to Bruce for Cooper, 31 January 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

81 Ibid

82 Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 354

83 Secret. Record a Meeting at No. 10 Downing Street at 10.00 am on Saturday, February 4, 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

Nevertheless, Wilson and the Americans believed Hanoi was now sending signals to the Americans. The State Department were certainly 'disposed' to treat the Stewart and Burchett interviews seriously. Goldberg believed that the various approaches from Hanoi represented either:

> (A) A sign of serious interest on Hanoi's part in beginning process toward reaching settlement or toward mutual abatement of the conflict; or
>
> (B) Part of an intensified propaganda effort to increase pressure of world and domestic opinion on US to end bombing.

He suggested to Rusk that Washington should follow a course that did not exclude either possibility.[84]

For this reason, the Americans decided to pursue parallel peace efforts. In addition to allowing Wilson to pursue peace talks with Alexei Kosygin, during his visit to London beginning on 6 February, the President agreed to a direct American approach to Hanoi via Moscow. According to Cooper, 'in early January the Russians had informed the US Embassy in Moscow that if the Americans made an effort to see the charge d'affaires of the North Vietnamese Embassy, preliminary exchanges might take place which could lead to serious talks.'[85] The Americans decided to go along with the suggestion and on 10 January John Guthrie, the senior Embassy Officer in Moscow called at the North Vietnamese Embassy. The Embassy was not expecting Guthrie and after a long delay he met with a North Vietnamese official, La Chang.

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84 Telegram from Goldber to President and Secretary Rusk, 2 February 1967 in Herring, Secret Diplomacy, p. 428

85 Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 346

Guthrie followed his brief and told the shocked official that the US government was prepared to engage in direct talks with the North Vietnamese government.[86]

As the Pentagon Papers noted, the Wilson-Kosygin peace initiative and US' direct approach to the North Vietnamese, code-named 'Sunflower', began separately but eventually became interrelated.[87] The Sunflower effort was 'enormously complex and confusing' but also offered 'further evidence of American diplomatic ineptitude'. The Pentagon Papers also noted that this episode 'aroused heated controversy' between the United States and Great Britain. This was clearly the case. A detailed analysis of the evolution of the Wilson-Kosygin peace initiative illuminates the sources of the disagreement between Washington and London, and the reasons for the intensity of the feelings on both sides of the Atlantic.

Of course, neither the British nor the Americans were sure that Moscow was interested in acting as an intermediary. Although Brown had felt there was some movement in the Soviet position, and Wilson was convinced that Kosygin's decision to come to London during the Tet truce was a hopeful sign, prior to the actual visit there was no clear evidence that the Russians would play 'go-between' on Vietnam. They might just decide to leave Hanoi to make a direct contact themselves. Brown was worried this was the case when it was announced that the entourage Kosygin would bring with him to London was relatively low-level.

Unlike the Marigold peace effort, which focussed on the terms of a final peace settlement, Sunflower focussed on mutual de-escalation as a way of establishing the right atmosphere in which to discuss a final settlement. The impasse

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86 Ibid

87 Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 373

at this stage was still as follows: the US required some kind of mutual de-escalation; the North Vietnamese demanded that the US stop the bombing unconditionally.

The Phase A-Phase B Formula - The Confusion Over Tenses

Wilson felt optimistic about a positive outcome from his talks with Kosygin. Cooper describes the Prime Minister as being in 'high spirits' about meeting the Russian premier at London airport and escorting him to Claridge's Hotel. The American representative admitted later that Wilson might not have been so enthusiastic had he known how Washington viewed his plans to talk to Kosygin about Vietnam. According to Cooper, the President, Walt Rostow and some within the State Department 'took a rather dim view' of Wilson's eagerness to play a part in Vietnam diplomacy.

> There was a sense that the British Government was pushing hard, perhaps too hard, to undertake the role of mediator. To be sure the British could claim both a right and responsibility to assume such a role; they and the Russians were Co-chairmen of the 1954 Geneva Conference and of the 1961-62 Laos Conference. But some of Wilson's American cousins felt his underlying motivation was to bolster his own and England's prestige ... that both Wilson and Brown were having happy dreams of being in the spotlight of a major international conference.[88]

The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers verify Cooper's beliefs. Clearly there was deep suspicion about the 'eagerness of the British leaders to participate with maximum personal visibility in bringing peace to Vietnam'.[89] Wilson certainly

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88 Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 355

89 Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 396

would have experienced a great deal of domestic relief from backbench pressures had he pulled off such a coup and would have welcomed the recognition that went along with it. However, it is difficult to believe that Wilson and Brown were primarily concerned with their chances of receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. It must be remembered that Wilson was simply not convinced that a military victory was possible and that he had openly questioned US military tactics. His desire for peace in Vietnam appears to have been genuine and one must credit him with some humanitarian, as well as political, motives. That is not to argue, however, that domestic, political concerns or international prestige factors were not spurring Wilson and Brown on; rather it is to affirm that there were other, important motives at work here too.

Cooper admits, however, that Washington held another 'less articulated but more deeply felt attitude' about Wilson's talks with Kosygin.[90] Basically, Johnson was not about to let the British Prime Minister get credit for pulling off peace talks after all the work the Americans had recently put in through the Polish contact and Guthrie's meetings with La Chang. In this sense, any form of third-party mediation was not particularly welcomed. If Hanoi was ready to talk, then the President was determined to reap the political benefits. There was also a third factor involved in the President's lack of enthusiasm for the Wilson-Kosygin talks: Johnson did not trust Wilson in negotiations. The Americans generally preferred direct talks, but they were particularly worried that the Prime Minister might trap them into terms that would prove unpalatable to them.

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[90] Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 356

Despite American reservations about the desirability of the Prime Minister conducting peace talks, Washington had little choice but to support the Wilson-Kosygin talks. The Johnson administration still wanted British support on Vietnam and was well aware that the price they paid for it was condoning Wilson's peace efforts. There was also a recognition that the Soviets might be able to apply pressure on the North Vietnamese on the negotiation front. As the *Pentagon Papers* show, the State Department later judged this matter in the following terms:

> Kosygin's visit to London in early February made British participation inevitable. Kosygin and Wilson would discuss Vietnam and issue statements on it with or without a US input. If we stood aloof from it, the results could be harmful to the US. And the possibility that Kosygin could use Soviet influence in Hanoi introduced an element of potential value, not available in direct US-DRV exchanges... Looking back on it, there seems little doubt that bringing the British in was to US advantage.[91]

However, this did not mean Washington was going to be fully open with the British. President Johnson had since the end of January been working on a draft letter to Ho Chi Minh appealing for peace. Early drafts apparently included the now standard Phase A-Phase B formula but also included talk of an unspecified time lag between the cessation of US bombing and the ending of North Vietnamese infiltration of the South. When the letter was finally delivered via Moscow on 8 February the terms had changed. The letter published in full in Johnson's memoirs, set out the following offer:

> I am prepared to order a cessation of bombing against your country and the stopping of further augmentation of U.S. forces

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91 Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 396

> in South Vietnam as soon as I am assured that infiltration into South Vietnam be land and by sea has stopped.[92]

The operative words were 'has stopped'. Unfortunately for the Wilson-Kosygin talks, the British had not been made aware of this letter to Ho or its content. Nor, as far as we know, were the US representatives in London told of this development.[93]

Kosygin arrived at London airport on the 6 February, having been diverted from Gatwick because of fog. Wilson's first session of private talks with Kosygin was at 3.30 pm on the day of Kosygin's arrival in London and the two statesmen got straight down to business on Vietnam. Wilson reviewed the US position as he knew it and referred to the apparent change of position in Hanoi that the Trinh interview seemed to indicate. He also reminded Kosygin of the Phase A-Phase B proposal that Brown had delivered in Moscow the previous November, and emphasised the nature of the opportunity offered by the fact that current talks coincided with the Tet truce.

According to the British record, Wilson presented his interpretation of this formula

> as a two-phased agreement designed to meet the situation in which North Viet-Nam required an unconditional cessation of bombing while the United States needed an assurance that some measure of de-escalation would follow if the bombing stopped. Assuming that an agreement could be reached secretly on such an arrangement, it would result in two things happening - first there would be overt action in the cessation of bombing, and secondly there would be further action in de-escalation by the United States side to which North Viet-Nam and the Liberation Front would respond by similar acts of de-escalation.[94]

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92 Letter to Ho Chi Minh from President Johnson, 8 February 1967 in Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehard & Winston, 1971), p. 592

93 Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 397

94 Record of First Formal Meeting between Harold Wilson & Alexei N. Kosygin, held at 10 Downing Street at 4.30 pm on Monday 6 February, 1967, PREM 13/1840

This outline of the formula 'got no flicker of interest' as Cooper quickly reported back to Rusk in Washington.[95] Wilson was also eager to arrange a Geneva-type conference to arbitrate over Vietnam but Kosygin felt that this was a premature suggestion, as did the Americans.[96]

At this stage Wilson was 'holding back on US refinements' on the mutual de-escalation formula, particularly the nature of the further acts of US de-escalation that would comprise Phase B.[97] He nevertheless stressed the hope that Kosygin could encourage the North Vietnamese to give the Americans 'a firm sign, during Tet, of a readiness to make a positive and visible response to a cessation of bombing'.[98] According to Wilson, for the first time Kosygin seemed ready to talk on this issue. Although denying that he was speaking for the North Vietnamese, or that he knew any more about their position than had been publicly stated, Kosygin did say that Trinh's statement should be endorsed by Britain and the Soviet Union in a public or private statement to the President as a basis for direct talks between the United States and North Vietnam. This was 'unacceptable' to the British but was considered to be merely 'Kosygin's opening gambit' and therefore not taken too seriously.[99]

Little more was agreed at this first meeting but the British were not discouraged. Indeed Donald Murray of the Foreign Office concluded that Kosygin was getting over four points, all of which were new. Kosygin agreed that there was a sense of urgency over the situation in Vietnam and the need to encourage peace talks; he acknowledged that the Tet truce provided an opportunity to begin the

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95 Telegram from Cooper to Rusk, 6 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 434

96 Record of First Formal Meeting held at 10 Downing Street at 4.30 pm on 6 February 1967, PREM 13/1840, PRO

97 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 347

98 Ibid

99 Secret Memo from D.F. Murray to George Brown, 'Kosygin', 6 February 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

process of establishing contact between the US and North Vietnamese; he accepted Russia and Britain had a part to play in assisting such talks; he acknowledged that the North Vietnamese appeared ready to consider settling by negotiation.[100]

The next meeting between Kosygin and Wilson was to be at an informal dinner given by the Prime Minister at No. 10 Downing Street at 8.00 pm that night. In the meantime, as Wilson put it, 'both sides were busy'.[101] The Prime Minister had further talks with Bruce and Cooper, and Kosygin was in touch with Hanoi.[102] Wilson also sent a telegram to Johnson reporting on his talks with Kosygin and asking for further clarification on the US position, especially regarding the Trinh formula. He specifically asked 'whether the U.S. could stop bombing North Vietnam in exchange for an indication that Hanoi would enter into talks without any military acts of de-escalation on their side'.[103] Johnson was clearly annoyed by this message. In a lengthy reply the President reminded Wilson that the US had refrained from bombing within a ten-mile radius of Hanoi because this had been given as the reason for Hanoi's termination of discussions with the Poles. Despite the continuation of this restriction, Hanoi had not offered any corresponding action Moreover, given that Hanoi insisted on a permanent end to the bombing, rather than a suspension, Johnson felt it 'all the more necessary to know what military action Hanoi would take' if the US stopped bombing. The Americans feared the North Vietnamese would use an end to the bombing to their military advantage by introducing even more troops and supplies into the South in order that their position be strengthened during negotiations. Johnson explained to Wilson that:

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100 Ibid

101 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 447

102 Ibid

103 Telegram from the President to the Prime Minister, 7 Feb 1967, in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 436

> we are prepared to and plan, through established channels, to inform Hanoi that if they will agree to an assured stoppage of infiltration into South Viet Nam, we will stop the bombing of North Viet Nam and stop further augmentation of U.S. forces in South Viet Nam. We would welcome your joint advocacy of this position.[104]

Wilson was, therefore, well aware of the United States' continuing approaches to Hanoi but did not realise that the wording of this communication would differ from Johnson's final draft letter to Ho Chi Minh. It would change from 'if they will agree to an assured stoppage' to 'as soon as I am assured that infiltration … has stopped'. It was a subtle difference but an important one.

Johnson also expressed his scepticism regarding Hanoi's willingness to begin talks and revealed his suspicions regarding North Vietnamese motives.

> You should be aware of my feeling that, in all of our various contacts with Hanoi, we have had no impression from them as to the substance of the issues which must be resolved as a part of a peaceful settlement... In sum, I would suggest that you try to separate the political processes of discussion from military action…We are prepared to move immediately on major steps of mutual de-escalation ... What we cannot accept is the exchange of guarantee of a safe haven for North Viet Nam merely for discussions which thus far have no form or content, during which they could continue to expand their military operations without limit.

The President was annoyed at Wilson's pushiness on this issue saying he doubted that Kosygin 'expected to resolve this matter on his first evening in London'; he strongly urged the two co-chairman not to send a joint message to him 'suggesting a stoppage

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[104] Ibid

of the bombing in exchange merely for talks' but instead explore 'additional leads'.[105]

The Foreign Office and Downing Street were alarmed by the strident and dismissive tone of this presidential message. After talking to Cooper, however, they explained to the Prime Minister that the message was 'pure Rostow' and that had the message originated in the State Department, then the tone would have been 'substantially different'. Either way, this brief from LBJ was 'tougher' than Wilson wanted to it be. Cooper believed that, after discussions with the Prime Minister and his advisers, he would be able to get 'something rather more forthcoming out of Washington'.[106] Wilson, well aware that the Tet pause would begin the next day, was not prepared to wait for Washington's tone to change, instead he decided to maintain the momentum of the previous day's talks by putting Vietnam on the afternoon's agenda.[107]

At that meeting, which Wilson carefully recounted in his memoirs, Kosygin was informed by the Prime Minister that he was 'satisfied the Americans would now be prepared to move to further actions to strengthen mutual confidence if they were able to secure some assurance that this move would be reciprocated'.[108] This was a rather optimistic reading of Johnson's cable, nevertheless Wilson went on to explain to Kosygin that,

> the Americans recognised the need for a first and visible step by them, and equally they recognised that this step must be

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105 Ibid, pp. 436-7

106 Message from Michael Palliser to Prime Minister, Secret, 'Vietnam', 7 February 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

107 Secret Note from Oliver Wright 'Agenda for this PM', 7 February 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO. The bombing pause was scheduled to last from 8-12 February. Starting 7 am, Wednesday 8 February Vietnam time and scheduled to end 7 am Sunday 12th Vietnam time).

108 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 449

> the cessation of bombing. This I believed they would do, and they realised it must be presented as being done unconditionally. Therefore, we had to use our ingenuity to find a means of divorcing, in presentation, the stopping of the bombing itself from the consequential actions, which Mr. Kosygin and I knew were essential if we were to get the bombing stopped.

He also expanded on the Phase A-Phase B proposal, volunteering one of the refinements in the US position:

> The US were willing, over and beyond the two-phase formula previously discussed, to stop the build-up of their forces in the South if they were assured that the movement of North Vietnam forces from the north to the south would stop at the same time. Essentially, therefore, the two stages were kept apart. But, because the United States Government would know that the second stage would follow, they would therefore be able first to stop the bombing, even if there was a short interval between the first stage and the actions to be taken by both sides at the second stage. There would be balanced concessions at the second stage, while the first stage would mean action only by the United States. They would be able to take that action only because they knew that the second stage, involving DRV action as well as US action, would follow in a short period of time.

Wilson also informed Kosygin that the US was now seeking to get word directly to Hanoi along similar lines. Indeed, Wilson and Brown expected that the secret discussions were set for the following day.[109] While Kosygin welcomed the fact that Washington was about to contact North Vietnam directly, he argued that he could not praise a decision to stop the bombing as the bombing had been wrong in the first place. He did however show 'considerable interest in this formulation'.[110] After further clarification from Wilson, Kosygin asked for the proposal to be put in writing to him. When Bruce visited 10 Downing Street after the talks to hear a 'resumé' of

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[109] Ibid

[110] Telegram from Cooper to Rusk, 7 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 439

Wilson's discussions with Kosygin, he got the impression that things that gone 'unexpectedly well'. He admitted in his diaries: 'I have begun at last to feel a moderate optimism about the possibilities of at least initiating talks with Hanoi.'[111]

Later that night Cooper cabled Rusk and Harriman to outline the day's events. In it he noted the British:

> hope that if any questions arise as to differences in the formulation of Phase A and Phase B as worked out today in London, and the formulation forwarded to Hanoi by Washington, Hanoi be told that the British text was authoritative in substance, although there may be stylistic or translation differences from the U.S. version.[112]

This was probably ultra-cautious British diplomacy but it proved prescient.

On the afternoon of 7 February Wilson was attending question-time in the House, when he mishandled a reply to a supplementary question referring to 'some tentative peace reports that Hanoi was willing to start negotiations but called them off when the Americans started bombing again last December'. His reply was a little too unguarded:

> I do not think that during this week it would be helpful to comment on a number of important points about Vietnam, but, as my Hon. Friend has referred to the discussions in December, of which I have all the details, perhaps I might tell him it is my view that what happened then was based on a very considerable two-way misunderstanding, and that is why I think certain events in December occurred. If my Hon. Friend is referring to the Polish discussions in anything that has happened since then, I do not think that it would be very helpful for me to offer comments this afternoon.[113]

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111 David Bruce diaries,. 7 February, 1967

112 Telegram from Cooper to Rusk and Harriman, 7 February 1967, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Margiold-Sunflower, Box 9, LBJL

113 Personal Telegram from Michael Palliser to Walt Rostow, 9 February 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

Wilson's response, with its tacit acceptance of the questioner's premise that secret peace negotiations had indeed been attempted in December 1966, caused consternation in the White House. Rostow cabled his friend and British counterpart, Michael Palliser, saying that the Prime Minister's answer had 'greatly distressed' Washington. His reasoning was that the Americans had 'held the facts tightly' and 'severely avoided any response, analysis, or explanation of that series of exchanges'.

Moreover, they disagreed with Wilson analysis of events,

> we are by no means convinced that there was a mis-understanding. Other explanations better fit the facts as we know them. In any case it is the strong feeling here that public discussions, leaks, etc., are incompatible with the enterprise in which we are engaged, which includes a half million of our fighting men.[114]

Given the Prime Minister's hopes for the Wilson-Kosygin talks, Palliser felt it necessary to reply at length to Rostow's cable in the hope that the matter would be laid to rest. He pointed out that the British Sunday papers had run with stories from Rostow himself that peace moves were under way behind the scenes and that 'an extremely interesting and delicate phase' in diplomatic probing had opened in an effort to find out whether the communists were really interested in ceasefire talks'. This revelation had been linked to the disclosure by the *Washington Post* that Lewandowski had been involved in talks in Hanoi. Palliser went on with admitted 'frankness' to say that the Prime Minister would find it ironic to be charged with leaking information on this subject, when it would not have been possible for the supplementary question to be asked had Washington not given the British press

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[114] Personal Telegram from Walt Rostow to Michael Palliser, 8 February 1967, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 9, File: [2/8/67 Wilson Kosygin], LBJL

enough details already.[115] Indeed, Palliser argued that taking Wilson's political problems into consideration, the Prime Minister could not have said less without 'exposing himself to heavy pressure to say a great more. As it was the Prime Minister had refused to comment on the Polish discussions, was in no way critical of the US Government, had merely revealed that he had knowledge of the events, and his answer had disposed of the matter'.[116] Also, by talking of a 'two-way misunderstanding' the Prime Minister was letting Kosygin know that he did not necessarily believe Hanoi's version of events'.[117]

Clearly, Washington, or at least Rostow and Johnson, overreacted to Wilson's comments in the House, possibly because they were not fully aware of the background as Palliser explained it, but probably because by now they no longer trusted Wilson to maintain a dignified silence on such issues. Rostow expressed his gratitude for Palliser's explanation but replied that Rusk's rule on peace moves was 'no substantive comment on any single channel'. At this stage, Rostow was content to say that the damaging part of Wilson's answer in the House was 'two-way misunderstanding' and that that they would have to deal with that 'sometime'. He also accepted 'full opprobrium' for his own lapse in this respect when he used the words 'interesting and delicate' to describe private peace moves.[118] The incident may partially explain why the White House had failed to inform London of the revisions to the letter to Ho Chi Minh.

While this spat between London and Washington was simmering in the background, diplomatic wranglings over Sunflower were hotting up. On 8 February,

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115 Ibid

116 Cable from Michael Palliser to Walt Rostow, 9 February 1967, PREM 13/1917, PRO

117 Ibid

118 Telegram from Walt Rostow to Michael Palliser, 10 February 1967, PREM13/1918, PRO

the day LBJ's letter was sent to Ho Chi Minh, Kosygin attended a number of business and civic engagements. During one of these, a luncheon given by the Lord Mayor at the Guildhall, Kosygin gave a speech in which he appeared to be inviting the British to reconvene the Geneva Conference:

> The United Kingdom is a state whose voice is heeded by many and it is precisely for this reasons that the Soviet government believes that today, as in 1954, Great Britain together with the Soviet Union and other nations could make its contribution to the settlement of the Vietnam issue on the basis of the Geneva agreement, which must be implemented by the United States.[119]

Given the British preference for a reconvening of the Conference, this speech prompted a flurry activity on both sides of the Atlantic. Cooper remembers how Kosygin's 'cryptic comments'

> *interrupted* the first proper dinner I had had in several days, kept me up most of the night, threw parts of Whitehall into disarray, gave Mrs. George Brown a pounding headache, and complicated Washington's instructions to me.

Cooper was called to George Brown's flat after an 'excited call' from the Foreign Secretary. Apparently, Brown 'was convinced that he and Wilson were on the right track in proposing another Geneva Conference - Kosygin's remarks suggested that the Russians were anxious to take this route'.[120] Brown and a reluctant Foreign Office came up with the suggestion that as well as pursuing peace talks privately (Phase A-Phase B), a public route should also be taken. Brown, Gore-Booth, Maclehose and Cooper worked on a draft written proposal that the two Co-chairmen

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[119] London BBC Television Service in English, Kosygin Speech at Lord Mayor's luncheon at the Guildhall in London on 8 February in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*

[120] Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 358

invite the US and the North Vietnamese to begin mutual de-escalation and should they agree to this the Co-chairmen would invite members of the 1954 Geneva Conference to reconvene on 15 February to work out a settlement of the present conflict.[121] Should the Soviets dissent from this public approach, Brown would press them to endorse the Phase A-Phase B formula in private instead. Cooper cabled the State Department after midnight to report Brown's plans; the reply confirmed his belief that Washington 'was unenthusiastic about the Geneva track'.[122]

Washington preferred a private package deal prior to an ending of US bombing or, indeed, a public Geneva-type conference. At the same time that Cooper had been summoned by Brown, Bruce had been called by Michael Palliser, just as he was about go to bed, asking him to go to Downing Street. Bruce remembers that his chauffer, Hyatt, deposited him 'in the lee of the Foreign Office, whence I circuited around to the postern gate in Whitehall. It seemed conspiratorial'. There he met the Prime Minister, Palliser, Burke Trend, Michael Halls, and Lord Chalfont who were discussing Kosygin's speech and the 'possible ploys' they might use in that day's meeting. Bruce noted that all present looked tired. No-one got to bed before 2.30 am.[123]

The late night was, however, used constructively. Despite Washington's preferences, Wilson and Brown planned to probe Kosygin on his Geneva comments at the following morning's meeting with the Premier. Although this discussion centred largely on economic issues, Brown asked if Kosygin's references to collaboration between the Soviet Union and Britain on Vietnam, and subsequent

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121 Telegram from Rusk to Bruce, 9 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy, p. 39*

122 Ibid

123 David Bruce diaries, 8 February 1967

reference to the Geneva agreement, signalled a Russian willingness to reconvene the Conference. According to notes taken by Murray of the Foreign Office, Kosygin replied that this was 'not exactly' what he had meant to imply, rather that he had 'proceeded upon the assumption that the main thing was for the UK and the Soviet Union to assist the two sides to meet together after the bombing stopped.' He suggested that after this has been done 'there may be various proposals for moving further ahead, including the reconvening of the Geneva Conference.' He also pointed out that he 'could not speak for Hanoi at this point' and that it was important to 'do first things first'. [124] Brown then pressed Kosygin further on the prospects of a Geneva conference, asking if he would agree to it reconvening on 15 February if the two-phase acts of de-escalation were agreed upon.[125] According to Cooper, again 'Kosygin gave the idea short shrift' although he did enquire whether this proposal had been discussed with the Americans.[126] Brown answered that if Kosygin could deliver his friends in Hanoi the British would try to 'deliver the Americans.' Kosygin said that he would need to know Hanoi's views first and that, in any case, a Geneva Conference would be 'a complicated issue'.[127]

The following morning, Friday 10 February, two days after LBJ's letter to Ho Chi Minh, Wilson met with Kosygin and summarised the current position. There were now two propositions on the table both based on mutual de-escalation: a public one that would result in a Geneva-type conference; and a private one based on Phase A-Phase B. Kosygin asked to hear the Phase A-Phase B proposal again. Wilson

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[124] Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 9 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p.444/445

[125] Secret Note on Mr. Kosygin's Visit - Vietnam, 9 February 1967, PREM 13/1917 & Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 9 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*

[126] Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 358

[127] Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 9 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 37

outlined it again. According to Wilson, 'Mr. Kosygin suddenly looked interested. It seemed that the way I had put it was in some way more attractive than what had been said earlier in the week'.[128] At this stage, Kosygin said he would like to think about the proposal. Wilson and the Foreign Office felt that Kosygin's response 'was sufficiently forthcoming' to warrant the Prime Minister's promise to provide the proposition in writing later that day.[129] Kosygin wanted it before leaving for Scotland that evening.[130]

On hearing news of the latest developments in London, the US State Department decided it was time to make its views more explicit. Rusk cabled Bruce to express his doubts that Hanoi would accept a public announcement of their acceptance of mutual de-escalation, even if it could be persuaded by the Soviets to go for such a deal. Russian involvement in the brokerage of the deal might make it particularly difficult for the North Vietnamese in light of their concerns over Chicom reactions and the Russians themselves might be concerned to appear to be working so closely with the Americans. Rusk's scepticism about the possibility of a public deal led him to inform Bruce that the 'British should be left in no doubt that, while we are most grateful for their serious considered efforts, they may well have to accept results rather than overt British participation in them'.[131] Wilson might have to settle for less of a public profile in the resolution of the conflict, in the background helping to secure a private settlement, rather than being the orchestrator of a public, Geneva-type conference. The British were told formally that they wanted Kosygin to know, and to pass on to Hanoi, their willingness to go along with either proposal.

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[128] Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 455

[129] Telegram from Cooper to Rusk and Harriman, 9 February, in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 37

[130] Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 359

[131] Rusk to Bruce, 9 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p.39

They did not 'at any cost want to appear to be pressing Hanoi to accept publicly any commitment which they might think would involve them in a loss of face'.[132]

The previous day, Washington had sent information to London on the movement of troops and equipment from North Vietnam heading towards the South. The bombing pause had only just begun and, as Wilson put in his memoirs, 'the Americans were getting worried'.[133] Wilson had mentioned this to Kosygin at their Thursday morning meeting, explaining that this did not help in the call for an end to US bombing.[134] According to Wilson, Kosygin 'took the figures seriously'.[135] Further messages were sent from Washington on this issue and were passed on to Kosygin.

Late on Thursday afternoon, 9 February, Chester Cooper, Murray and Gore Booth had begun work on the written version of Phase A-Phase B to be delivered to Kosygin. Wilson records he 'wanted to make absolutely certain that the text was approved by the Americans'.[136] Wilson insisted that he was assured the text had been confirmed as the American position and that he had been 'assured that there had been the fullest consultation with the State Department at top level' about the text. The Americans viewed the situation differently.[137] When drafting the letter to Kosygin, Cooper and Murray clearly had America's fourteen points in mind. The points, which had been publicly issued on 7 January and further elaborated upon as recently as 27 January, contained the following as part of the fourteenth point:

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[132] Note, 10 February 1967, PREM 13/1918, PRO
[133] Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 455
[134] Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 357
[135] Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 455
[136] Ibid
[137] Ibid, p. 456

> We are prepared to order a cessation of all bombing of North Viet-Nam, the moment we are assured -- privately or otherwise -- that this step will be answered promptly by a corresponding and appropriate deescalation of the other side.[138]

Cooper thought the draft also 'seemed fully consistent' with the text of Johnson's cable to Wilson of 7 February. The authors of the text therefore felt that they were clear on America's terms for Phase A-Phase B. Consequently Cooper 'cabled the statement to Washington, confident that it required little more than pro forma approval'.[139]

Cooper recorded that he felt happy that Washington should receive his cable by around 6.30 pm Washington time on Thursday 9 February and that this allowed plenty of time for the State Department to reply before Kosygin's scheduled departure for Scotland on Friday evening. However, the only cable Cooper had received by Friday morning was one reminding him to tell Wilson of the State Department's concern that North Vietnamese troops continued to move southwards. He thought, however, 'the Department might have taken a dim view of my troubling busy people with such a simple question. But, I thought, they could at least send a terse 'O.K.'.[140] Cooper informed Wilson about the cable regarding the continuing flow of North Vietnamese troops, but that he had heard nothing back on the Phase A-Phase B message. By late afternoon there was still no reply, so a repeat message was sent. The cable merely said 'here is text of Phase A-Phase B formula which is to be sent to Kosygin at his request ASAP. Need guidance urgently' and then outlined the steps involved in this plan (my emphasis):

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138 Department of State, Public Information Bulletin, 13 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*

139 Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 359

140 Ibid

(A) The United States will stop bombing North Vietnam as soon as they are assured that infiltration from North Vietnam to South Vietnam **will stop**. This assurance can be communicated in secret if North Vietnam so wishes.

(B) Within a few days (with the period to be agreed between the two sides before the bombing stops) the United States will stop further augmenting their forces in South Vietnam and North Vietnam will stop infiltration and movement of forces into the South.

(C) The cessation of bombing of North Vietnam and the cessation of build-up United States forces in the south are actions which will be immediately apparent.

(D) A cessation of infiltration is more difficult for the world to observe. Nevertheless the United States will not demand any public statement from North Vietnam.

(E) Any secret assurances from Hanoi can reach the United States direct, or through Soviet channels, or through the Soviet and British governments. This is for North Vietnam to decide.[141]

Apparently Wilson was 'restless' about Washington's lack of feedback as Kosygin had pressed the British for the written version earlier in the day.[142] Cooper however remembers that by '7 o'clock I was convinced there would be no reply - and that silence meant consent'.[143] By that time, Wilson had left for a reception given by the Soviet Ambassador and Cooper felt able to go to the theatre to watch a production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. He left word that he could be contacted there and informed the ushers where he was seated. Twenty minutes into the first act, around 9 o'clock, Cooper felt a tap on his shoulder and he was escorted 'through a maze of corridors' to a phone close to the stage door:

> The stage doorman, a somewhat aged but very distinguished-

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[141] Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 10 February in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*

[142] Transcript, Chester Cooper Oral History interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, 7 August, 1969, Interview III, p. 16, LBJL

[143] Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 360

looking fellow, was beside himself. He shoved the phone at me shouting 'It's from Washington - the White House!' Around me were running, shrieking girls from the chorus. Under me the orchestra was pounding away. I had a difficult time getting through. Finally, in exasperation Walt Rostow shouted across 3,000 miles of ocean, 'Where the hell are you?' I remember shouting back, 'If I told you, you wouldn't believe me!' 'How far are you from the Embassy?' Rostow demanded. 'About as far as I can possibly get,' I answered. 'Well, get back damn fast.'

He got back to the Embassy around 9.30 pm and received a message saying there had been a 'complete revision' of the proposal to be handed to Kosygin. [144] Although Cooper had telephoned Walt Rostow on his returned to Grosvenor Square and had told him that there was a possibility that the written version of Phase A-Phase B had already been passed to Kosygin, he did not think 'it registered'.[145] Cooper was told to meet Wilson and Brown at to 10 Downing Street where the revised message would come through on teletype.

The Prime Minister had returned from the reception and private dinner at the Soviet Embassy at Kensington Palace Garden where at around 7 pm he had handed Kosygin a document outlining 'almost word for word' what Wilson had said in their morning meeting. [146] According to Wilson, 'Mr Kosygin was taking the day's developments very seriously and clearly with some hope'.[147] On returning to Downing Street, Wilson says he found Bruce and Cooper waiting for him. According to Wilson, after telling them of the latest talks with Kosygin, Wilson says Bruce said, 'Prime Minister, I think you've made it. This is going to be the biggest diplomatic coup of this century'. Wilson claims he 'demurred' arguing that Hanoi

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144 Oral History Interview, Chester Cooper, Interview III, p. 17 & Chester Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 360
145 Ibid
146 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 456
147 Ibid, pp. 456-7

and China's reactions were not yet known.[148] Bruce later denied that he had said Wilson 'had it in the bag'. He believes 'that was hyperbolic. I was skeptical about achieving a result. I was in favor of his taking a try at it. I think that's the distinction'.[149] Either way, Wilson was soon deflated when Cooper informed the Prime Minister that a message was about to come through from the White House. It arrived at about 10.30 pm and according to Cooper: 'My heart fell as I saw it. We were in a brand new ballgame'.[150]

The key aspect of the original Phase A-Phase B proposal was the US agreement to stop bombing first; the new terms reversed the order of events, now the North Vietnamese had to stop infiltration first and then the US would stop bombing. As Cooper later put it:

> The sequence of Phase A and Phase B had been reversed, and the whole formula had been distorted. In short what we would be saying to the North Vietnamese was that a bombing cessation would be directly conditional on their stopping infiltration – a proposition Hanoi had thrown back to us time and time again, and one that was completely inconsistent with Rusk's elaboration of his 'Fourteen Points,' as publicly released only a few days before. It was hard to believe that the Washington draftsmen realised the implications of their new formula.[151]

In addition to the change in tenses, the new text also included an additional change. Despite having assured the British that Washington would be happy with a private arrangement with Hanoi, the new package insisted on a public commitment. The text included the following (my emphasis):

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148 Ibid, p. 457

149 Transcript, David K.E. Bruce Oral History Interview by Thomas H. Baker, 9 December 1971, Tape. No. 2, LBJL

150 Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 361

151 Ibid

A. The United States will order a cessation of bombing of North Vietnam as soon as they are assured that infiltration from North Vietnam to South Vietnam **has stopped**. This assurance can be communicated in secret if North Vietnam so wishes.

B. Within a few days (with the period to be agreed with the two sides before the bombing stops) the United States will stop further augmenting their force in South Vietnam. The cessation of bombing of North Vietnam is an action which will be immediately apparent. This requires that the stoppage of infiltration becomes public very quickly thereafter. If Hanoi is unwilling to announce the stoppage of infiltration, the United States must do so at the time it stops augmentation of U.S. forces. In that case, Hanoi must not deny it.

C. Any assurances from Hanoi can reach the United States direct, or through Soviet channels, or through the Soviet and British Governments. This is for North Vietnam to decide.[152]

Cooper doublechecked with Rostow that Washington understood that this was not just a change of tense, it was a complete reversal of the terms. And, if Wilson had already delivered a text to Kosygin, should the new one be substituted. Apparently by now both men had nearly lost their 'cool' and Cooper was informed that the change in terms had come from the President, largely as a result of the North Vietnamese troop movements over the past few days. Cooper admitted that when he called Rostow he was 'sore as hell' and said 'Well, Jesus, how can you do this! You kept telling me to press the Phase A-Phase B, that is what Wilson was doing, the only Phase A-Phase B I knew was the one that was current.' Rostow replied that he didn't 'give a Goddamn' about either Cooper or Wilson 'you damn well change it'.[153]

According to Cooper, Wilson and Brown were 'incredulous and irate'. [154] This

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[152] Ibid

[153] Oral History interview, Chester Cooper, Interview III, p. 19

[154] Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 362

action placed the British in a most embarrassing situation with Kosygin. Wilson had already delivered the written statement and was now in the position of having to hand Kosygin a revised text before he boarded his over-night train to Scotland which was due to depart at 11.35 pm from Euston station. As Kosygin had already left Claridge's Hotel and was on his way to the station, Wilson's Private Secretary, Michael Halls, was despatched to the station and duly delivered the letter to Kosygin as he boarded the train. The letter included an introductory sentence which stated this was a message received direct from the White House and could be taken now as 'the authentic United States position on the subject'.[155]

Not surprisingly Wilson was incensed at Washington's change in policy at the last moment and wanted to know what had gone wrong.. He later wrote in his memoirs that:

> We were staggered ... No one could understand what had happened. I said that there could be only three explanations. One, which I was reluctant to believe, what that the White House had taken me - and hence Mr. Kosygin - for a ride. Two ... that the Washington hawks had staged a successful take-over. Three ... that the authorities were suffering from a degree of confusion about a possible and unfortunate juxtaposition of certain parts of their anatomy, one of which was their elbow.[156]

The Foreign Office put it in more diplomatic terms, 'there was a state of unutterable, anatomical confusion in the higher part of the Administration.'[157] Cooper later learnt that the advisers who met to discuss Cooper's telegram were not Vietnam experts.

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155 Letter from Harold Wilson to His Excellency Mr. A.N. Kosygin, 10 February 1967, Secret, PREM 13/1918, PRO

156 Wilson, *Labour Government,* p. 458

157 Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the President of the United States of America at the White House on the morning of Friday, 2nd June, 1967, Confidential Annex to the Visit of the Prime Minister to Canada and the United States, 1-3 June 1967, PREM 13/1919, PRO

Bill Bundy, the specialist on Far Eastern affairs was not in attendance. Instead, it appears the decision was made by LBJ, Rusk and Rostow.[158] 'They were addressing my draft as something that was kind of invented apparently in London, instead of being something that had been developed and manicured for about five months', Cooper explained.[159] Bruce's favoured hypothesis was also that there had been a breakdown of communication not only between London and Washington but also between key foreign policy advisors at the White House.

Privately, Wilson believed there had been deliberate sabotage and clearly favoured his own second possible explanation of events. He later commented that,

> no degree of mental confusion in Washington ... could possibly be adduced in defence of such a fundamental change. It was a reversal of policy, and it had been deliberately taken just when there was a real chance - one thinks of Ambassador Bruce's words earlier that evening - of a settlement based on the prolongation of the Tet truce from the end of the week when it was due to end.[160]

Johnson, in his memoirs, insisted that Wilson had not received specific approval from Washington to deliver the first draft.[161] This was of course strictly speaking true. This does not, however, explain the textual change. Noticeably, in a meeting with Wilson during the Prime Minister's visit to Washington in June of 1967, Johnson 'did not try to deny' Wilson's belief that 'there had been a change of policy under pressure by their hawks'.[162] Rostow was labelled the chief culprit. Wilson

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158 David Kraslow & Stuart H. Loory, *The Secret Search for Peace in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage, 1968)p. 194

159 Oral History Interview, Chester Cooper, Interview III, p. 20

160 Wilson, *Labour Government*, pp. 458-459

161 Johnson, *Vantage Point*, p. 254

162 Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the President of the United States of America at the White House on the morning of Friday, 2 June, 1967, Confidential Annex to the Visit of the Prime Minister to Canada and the United States, 1-3 June, 1967, PREM 13/1919, PRO

noted that 'in terms of influence on his master, the more I saw of certain White House advisers the more I thought that Rasputin was a much-maligned man.'[163]

Brown also agreed that Rostow was the major problem in Washington:

> There were doveish officials in Washington who were trying to help, and hawkish officials, mostly nearer to the scene of events, who were trying to prevent the doves from helping. The Prime Minister's hot line to President Johnson was not as reliable as it ought to have been. I think that the fact of the matter was that Mr Johnson didn't really like the Prime Minister much, and the hot line from No. 10 that went allegedly directly to the President was inclined to go instead to Mr. Rostow.[164]

Rostow may well have encouraged Johnson to take a harder line with North Vietnam. As already noted, the White House had only reluctantly agreed to sanction Wilson's peace initiative with Kosygin. Moreover by early 1967 the President was being given relentlessly optimistic assessments of the state of the military campaign in Vietnam. Despite the appearance of a stalemate, the CIA reassured Johnson that US bombing was now having an effect on the North Vietnamese economy; the Agency was convinced that no serious concessions should being given to Hanoi as military pressure would shortly push them towards negotiations. And although the President was desperate for an end to the war, he genuinely felt the US had responded positively to every indication that the North Vietnamese were seeking peace, to no effect. As far as he was concerned, the Wilson-Kosygin talks might be good for the America's image as peaceseeker, but they did not appear to offer a realistic chance for peace.

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163 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 468

164 Brown, *In My Way*, p. 145

Of course, Wilson and Brown were unaware of Johnson's true feelings on the war and were, as far as they were concerned, receiving decidedly mixed signals from Washington. The Prime Minister was wrong, however, to discount entirely his unpalatable theory that he might have been taken for a ride by the White House. Wilson had not been part of the loop; he had not been kept fully up-to-date on latest development, particularly the change in tenses contained in Johnson's letter to Ho Chi Minh. The Americans were not fully behind his efforts. It is entirely possible therefore that the change of tense in the Phase A-Phase B proposal occurred partly because there had been some confusion in the White House due to the absence of Bill Bundy over the detail of previous texts, and that this coincided with a hardening of attitude towards the North Vietnamese by Johnson, who felt his own politically risky gesture of initiating a bombing pause had been abused by Hanoi. Because Washington was making no special efforts to co-operate with British peace initiatives and had its own peace feelers out to Hanoi, Johnson and his advisers were not particularly worried if Wilson was temporarily embarrassed in front of the Russians.

Whatever the true explanation, Cooper was left to pick up the pieces. He describes the atmosphere at Downing Street that night as 'gloomy and hostile'. As those assembled struggled to explain what had happened, Wilson and Brown turned their anger on one another. Cooper remembers that they

> just went at each other, it was just terrible. Brown accused Wilson of being too premature; and that time and time again during these discussions Wilson didn't inform Brown as to what was going on; Brown on at least three occasions that

night resigned as Foreign Minister.[165]

When Wilson took Brown into a private room to straighten things out, Cooper was asked to accompany them, almost as a witness.[166] The day's events had descended into farce. Brown later claimed that he thought it was a mistake to deliver the new version of Phase A-Phase B to Kosygin before he arrived in Scotland, after all there was nothing Kosygin could do with the message while he was on a train. Instead, he thought they should have used Kosygin's journey time to Edinburgh to try to persuade the Americans to change their minds.[167]

Wilson could not contain himself, called the White House and spoke to Walt Rostow. Cooper said that in the two decades of his diplomatic career he 'had never seen anyone quite so angry' but that 'Wilson kept himself very much under control as he explained how embarrassing and damaging the Washington message was.'[168]

Cooper felt partly responsible for events, feeling that he had 'somehow ... led Wilson astray'. He considered that his career might come to an end as a result of the day's events.[169]

> They were all mad at Washington; they were mad at each other; they were angry at me; and I was angry at them; and I was angry at Washington -- more angry at Washington than anybody. It was a pretty rough night.[170]

Cooper called it 'Black Friday'.[171] Bruce remembered that after the revised version had been delivered to Kosygin, Wilson 'dictated and discussed with us a series of

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165 Oral History Interview, Chester Cooper, Interview III, p. 21
166 Ibid
167 George Brown, *In My Way*, p. 146
168 Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 362
169 Ibid
170 Oral History Interview, Chester Cooper, Interview III, p. 21
171 Ibid

four telegrams' he proposed sending to the President. One of the telegrams concerned 'his now settled wish to go, with or without Kosygin, to Hanoi, if the discussions break down on Sunday.' Bruce predicted this would 'cause a violently unfavourable reaction in Washington'. The Prime Minister asked Bruce and Cooper to explain his arguments for such a visit.[172]

The following morning, Saturday 11 February, Cooper received a telegram from the White House explaining in more detail the reasoning behind the change in tenses. He later described this rationale as 'contrived'.[173] The cable, apparently drafted by Bill Bundy, argued that the revised Phase A-Phase B was consistent with the details in Johnson's letter to Ho Chi Minh, dated 8 February, which of course neither Cooper nor Wilson was aware of. The telegram stressed the warnings Washington had delivered regarding North Vietnam's violation of the Tet truce. Cooper judged the telegram to be 'a very tortured ex post facto rationalization' that was 'drafted by Bill Bundy, who was attempting to pick up the pieces, not having been at the meeting on Friday night'.[174] Washington also forwarded the latest figures on the North Vietnamese troops movements. During the truce, up to 6pm on Friday, more than 2050 trucks had been spotted heading south, as compared to a daily average of 100 trucks in the pre-truce period.[175]

This telegram inflamed the situation in London. Wilson, Brown, Cooper and Bruce were all outraged at events. With Kosygin in Scotland, they had all day to reflect on matters and decide on a course of action for the final day of talks with the

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[172] Bruce diaries, 10 February 1967

[173] According to Cooper the telegram was drafted by Bill Bundy. Oral History Interview, Chester Cooper, Interview III, p. 21

[174] Oral History Interview, Chester Cooper, Interview III, pp. 21/22

[175] Secret. Record of a Meeting at 10, Downing Street at 10.40 pm on Saturday 11 February, PREM 13/1918, PRO

Russians at Chequers on Sunday. Wilson had had high hopes for the talks; they now looked to be in ruin. He was convinced the Soviets would no longer believe he was in the confidence of the Americans and could certainly not 'deliver' them to the negotiating table. Bruce recalls that Wilson instructed Paul Gore-Booth at the Foreign Office, 'to chew us up' on the shift in American policy. Wilson also began using the 'dissociation' word again. This time in relation to US plans to renew bombing in Vietnam while Kosygin was still in Britain. Once back at Grosvenor Square, Bruce and Cooper 'indulged in an orgy of telephone conversations.'[176] Rusk rang twice regarding the bombing renewal decision and Rostow once 'to deliver a lecture in defence of the controversial paper'.[177]

More worrying as far as Bruce was concerned was a call he took from Burke Trend. The Prime Minister was considering two possibilities: 'a talk with Kosygin shortly after his return from Scotland tomorrow morning, if we could meanwhile ascertain from State whether they had modified their last position. He also said the PM was talking about a possible trip to Washington on Monday'. Bruce did 'not think well of their proposal'.[178] Bruce also received a telephone call from George Brown 'to report he was most unhappy over recent events, and intimated, to use his favourite word, the US had made a "bloody" mess of things'. Bruce sent a telegram to Dean and McNamara expressing his personal opinion that the political effects of a renewal of bombing before Kosygin left London would be severe, particularly the risk of alienating the Soviets. The experts in Washington met and after much

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176 David Bruce diaries, 11 February 1967
177 Ibid
178 Ibid

discussion agreed to extend the pause, although the decision would not be made public until Kosygin had left London.[179]

Later that evening, Wilson and Brown, and three advisers, met with Bruce and Cooper to discuss in detail what had happened, the latest telegrams from Washington and to consider the best way forward. This proved to be yet another stormy session, indeed Cooper remembers he thought they would be lucky to

> finish the night's work without some very ugly scenes between the British and the Americans, or among the British themselves. Ten years before, during the Suez crisis, I had had a ringside seat at a major Washington-London squabble. Once again I sensed Anglo-American relations dissolving before my eyes. I did not look forward to the hours ahead.[180]

Bruce remembers that he and Cooper 'had two and half hours of rather rough handling'.[181] Bruce noted in his diary that Brown was more 'vehement' than Wilson in his criticism of the US but thought 'he was fatigued and perhaps somewhat inebriated'.[182]

The meeting was indeed lengthy, lasting just over three hours. Both parties outlined their version of events and Wilson and Bruce expressed three immediate concerns. First, the British were worried that the change in the text signalled a harder line from the United States. Secondly, they thought a resumption of US bombing would shock world opinion and further increase the British government's domestic difficulties, particularly if the story of the last few days' farrago came out. Wilson was worried that the Soviets might leak the news and argued that 'The Soviet

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179 Ibid
180 Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 363
181 David Bruce Diaries, 11 February 1967
182 Ibid

Government would thereby make the British look fools and not knaves and make the Americans look knaves and not fools'.[183] And finally, the British were extremely angry that the United States had allowed them to misrepresent themselves to the Russians as being in the confidence of the Americans. Wilson stressed that he thought he had been operating with the full co-operation and encouragement of the Americans and had had Cooper's approval for the version of Phase A-Phase B that he had delivered to Kosygin. Since the events of the previous day 'there was now a very serious implication in the fact that if we failed to deliver our friend, i.e., the United States, we would lose credibility and hence influence with the Russians'.[184]

The British also informed the Americans of the implications of these latest developments. One possible consequence might be partial or even total British dissociation from US policy in Vietnam. Brown was equally candid with Bruce and Cooper and admitted that although he 'very anxious' that the word dissociation not be repeated, American action was pushing the British Government in that direction. Wilson agreed, admitting that if the United States had decided to resume bombing before Mr. Kosygin left London, 'he would have been forced to dissociate'. He also revealed that before the Americans had arrived

> he had been discussing the possible direction of British policy with the Foreign Secretary. At that point he thought he had known where his duty lay. If the message which he knew as coming from Washington was not going to give him anything on Phase A of the two-phase package, and of course nothing on Phase B, he thought that the British would have to distance themselves somewhat from the United States and manifestly take a line more independent of their policy. He wondered whether the line to take with Mr. Kosygin was to advise him

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183 Record of a Meeting at 10 Downing Street at 10.40 pm on Saturday, 11 February 1965, PREM 13/1918, PRO

184 Ibid

> not to assume that the British always agreed with United States policy.[185]

The Prime Minister stressed on a number of occasions, that the British should probably take a more independent line as this would help stabilize British public opinion. Either way Wilson believed that

> things might not ever be the same again. Trust had been broken. Naturally, even if there were an act of dissociation … Anglo-American relations would recover. Nevertheless, neither side wanted another Suez. It was essential for the United States to put matters back on an even keel again.

Moreover, Wilson would 'stand by' the first letter he had given Kosygin on Friday evening.

In terms of peace negotiations, the Prime Minister pointed out that another consequence of the US change of mind might well be a loss of Russia's credibility with Hanoi. He also gave his frank opinion of the three choices he had available to him. He could say to Kosygin that he was after all not in the President's confidence; or he could tell him that the change was due to the Tet violations; or 'he could say American policy was confused and that one member of the Administration was saying one thing and another was saying another thing'.

Bruce and Cooper did their best to take the heat out of the situation at the same time as defending the US position. This was particularly difficult as neither approved of the White House's actions. Cooper valiantly put forward the line Washington expected of him and suggested he thought it credible that Kosygin would believe the change in tenses was due to North Vietnamese troop activity. He

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185 *Ibid*

did, however, reveal that he personally thought the 'the United States Administration had not kept the Prime Minister as fully and as rapidly informed as he would have hoped'.[186] Bruce tried to calm Wilson down by suggesting Kosygin's reaction might not be as bad as the Prime Minister feared. However, when the Ambassador wondered whether the difference between the two proposals was 'very great', Wilson replied that if that was the case, 'he was inclined to try to get Mr. Kosygin to accept the original text and then to press the American Administration to accept it as their policy'.[187]

The meeting moved on to discuss the tactics for the final day's meeting with Kosygin on Sunday. Brown and Wilson agreed that the best way forward was to raise the discrepancies in various messages with Kosygin, stress that the US change in policy had been brought on by the Tet violations but then 'press hard for the Prime Minister's (7 p.m.) version of the letter to Mr. Kosygin; if Mr. Kosygin accepted it, then to undertake to seek American acceptance of it'. In response to a question from Brown, Chester Cooper said it might be possible to secure a further suspension of the bombing if there was a 'glimmer of hope' in the discussions. Wilson decided he would after all send a message to the President'.[188]

The meeting ended at 1.45 am and Wilson did not leave for Chequers until 3.15 am. Nevertheless, he apparently woke 'fresh and with a clear view'.[189]

> If I could get nothing more reasonable to offer than the existing US attitude, I would put my own views as the British view and attempt to sell it to the US on the one hand and Mr. Kosygin on the other. Thereafter that would be the British Government's

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186 Ibid
187 Ibid
188 Ibid
189 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 461

definite proposal for the ending of the war.[190]

Wilson also suggested on Saturday that Chester Cooper go out to Chequers where a direct telephone link to the White House and Bruce at the Embassy would allow the Americans to be kept fully up-to-date with developments during the final day of the talks. The Americans agreed to this request and quickly reassured the British that no military action against North Vietnam would be taken until Kosygin had left.

Washington also responded sharply to the suggestion that Wilson travel to Hanoi, they expressed their 'appreciation' of the offer but said they felt 'such a trip, in the light of the present situation, would not be desirable'.[191]

Having had some time to digest and reflect on Friday evening's events, Wilson finally sent the President two messages by private wire. The first one outlined the 'hell of a situation' he was in for the final day of talks with Kosygin.[192] He expressed his anguish over the change of tenses in the new text and reiterated his view that his own credibility with the Russians had been compromised and Kosygin may have lost the confidence of Hanoi as a result of the switch. He also informed Johnson that he intended to pursue the softer version, the one he had originally handed to Kosygin, and if it was accepted, he would try and press the President on the matter. He then said he hoped to get to a position where he and Kosygin, knowing the views of their respective friends, could find a solution to the conflict which they could then recommend, 'like two solicitors seeking to settle a matter out of court, ad referendum to the two clients'.[193] Wilson's second message contained

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[190] Ibid

[191] Top Secret Telegram from Dean to Wilson, 12 February 1967,Wilson talked of Brown and Gromyko visiting Washington, and envisaged Kosygin accompanying him to Hanoi, PREM 13/1918

[192] Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 460 and Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 460/461

[193] Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 460 & footnote p. 844

his version of the 'misunderstanding' that had taken place over the tenses, which was basically a defence of British actions.

Johnson replied almost immediately. Wilson described the President's cable as 'warm'. However, as Wilson himself admitted in his memoirs, there was some doubt over who drafted such memos. Often, it was Bundy or Katzenbach, so there was little genuine sentiment in this. Most space was dedicated to refuting many of Wilson's allegations and gently refusing his suggestions. In particular, Johnson did not believe the 'the matter hangs on the tenses of verbs' as the Phase A-Phase B proposal had been on table since November and Hanoi had 'shown no flicker of interest' in it. At the same, the North Vietnamese had continued their military build up. Neither did the President accept Wilson's view that the US position on Phase A-Phase B was inconsistent:

> We asked on February 7 for an 'assured stoppage' of infiltration. In your version … it was transmuted to an assurance that infiltration 'will stop'. This, in our view, is a quite different matter.[194]

Johnson informed Wilson that Hanoi was likely to get in touch regarding the President's message to Ho Chi Minh at the conclusion of the present talks in London and suggested 'there is importance … in our staying together. We must not let them play one position off against another'. Wilson's notion of following his own line was not welcome and therefore the President concluded 'I'm always glad to know that you are in my corner but I would have some difficulty, in view of my responsibilities and problems here, in giving anyone a power of attorney'.[195]

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[194] Telegram from President to Prime Minister, 12 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 463

[195] Telegram from Walt Rostow to Bruce, Literally Eyes Only for Ambassador Bruce and Cooper

Wilson vehemently denied that he wanted 'a power of attorney' and pointed to the wording of his message, which had been 'ad referendum'.[196]

The Final Days of the Talks - Sunday 12 February

One of the main purposes of the final meeting between Wilson and Kosygin was to agree on the wording of a communiqué on the visit. It is clear, however, that Wilson was hoping that his last-ditch attempt to establish peace talks would be successful.

The main complicating factor at this final meeting was the scheduled end to the Tet truce which would take place that day. Originally the bombing pause was planned to cover the Tet celebrations (3 days), but it had been extended largely at Wilson's request for another 24 hours. The British were anxious that they would be embarrassed in front of Kosygin if the bombing started while the Premier was still in London.

Kosygin was due to arrive at Chequers for dinner at 6 pm. Earlier on Sunday morning Wilson had sent a cable to Johnson informing him that he would have one last try at proposing de-escalation. To meet the President's fear that the US cessation of bombing would be used by the North Vietnamese to rush troops into the demilitarized zone, he would propose that the 'two-way assurance' contain a specific timetable for the ending of DRV infiltration into the South.[197] Wilson was not asking for permission to put this plan forward to Kosygin, as he would take sole responsibility for it but would ask the President for his view if the Russian Premier

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196 Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 462

197 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 461/2

appeared interested. In the hope that the President would reply almost immediately to any such request, Cooper was duly ensconced in a private bedroom at Chequers shortly after lunch. An attic room that had in 1465 been used as a prison for Lady Mary Grey, sister of Jane, the room was ideal for Cooper's purposes as it was well away from the main proceedings and had a window that overlooked the courtyard to the front. Cooper would be able to see the comings and goings at Chequers. The stage was now sent for Act II of the farce.

By Sunday afternoon Wilson was reportedly in a calmer frame of mind, having played a round of golf. Kosygin also apparently arrived in a relaxed mood after his visit to Scotland. During their first afternoon meeting the Soviet premier made no mention of the change in text that had occurred on Friday night, and also made it clear that he saw no point in pursuing the Trinh formula. A discussion of the communiqué brought some tension to the proceedings as Kosygin was loath to have any mention of Anglo-Soviet joint peace efforts; he was adamant that there be no publicity. The final signed statement was rather lengthy, covering the broad spectrum of the talks. However, it remained vague on Vietnam, acknowledging 'a prolonged exchange of views' on the subject and agreeing 'it was essential to achieve the earliest possible end' of the war. Both governments 'confirmed their adherence to the principles of the Geneva Agreements of 1954 and 1962' and committed themselves to making 'every possible effort with a view to achieving a settlement of the Vietnam problem, and will maintain contact to this end'.[198]

Washington quickly gave its approval to the communiqué, which was issued at 1200 London time 13 February following Kosygin's departure. Washington was

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198 Telegram from Kaiser to Rusk, 13 February 1967, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210, File: UK, Vol. X, Memos, 1/67-4/67, LBJL

in emergency session on and off throughout the day and into the evening. However, although it was earlier in Washington than in London and as time wore on Bruce remembers 'we found the officials at home becoming testier and testier, especially when confronted by a request from Wilson and George Brown, which was refused, to extend further the bombing pause. We had some rather angry interchanges with Walt Rostow about this'.[199]

At around 5 o'clock, having sat around for hours thinking, Cooper had a 'brainstorm'. When Burke Trend came up to Cooper's room for a chat and a drink, Cooper tried his plans out on him. Cooper felt that as the day's events were going 'reasonably well' it was worth trying to 'salvage something of value'.[200] It was felt that the White House's concern about NVA troop movements, could be dealt with by an assurance from Hanoi that it would keep its forces north of the 17th parallel in exchange for an extension to the current bombing pause. Once that commitment was in place 'there would be diplomatic elbowroom to explore further steps that might lead to talks, even negotiations'.[201] Trend thought the proposal was worth trying and took it down to Wilson who was still in talks with Kosygin. Having learnt a lesson from Friday's events, the note stressed that the Prime Minister shouldn't mentioned it to Kosygin before Washington had approved the idea. Wilson agreed to it. Cooper was quickly in contact by phone to Benjamin Read at the State Department who thought the proposal 'sounded eminently reasonable.' He agreed to forward it to Walt Rostow at the White House and let Cooper know the White House's decision as soon as possible.

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199 David Bruce diaries, 12 February 1967

200 Oral History Interview, Chester Cooper, Interview III, p. 26/7 and Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 365

201 Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 365

Cooper, well aware that Kosygin would leave Chequers shortly after dinner, became impatient as hours went by with no response from Washington. He made two further calls to Ben Read and one to Walt Rostow, and was assured that the President and member of the National Security Council were examining the proposal carefully and would let him know the outcome shortly. Wilson, in the meantime, was sending notes to Cooper asking for the approval so that he could present the new proposal to Kosygin before he left. Wilson recalls that he tried to stall Kosygin's departure by engaging him in a filibuster conversation on subjects ranging from the Common Market to geology, a subject in which Kosygin's had a personal.[202]

It was now after ten o'clock and after signing the communiqués in the Great Parlour, Kosygin prepared to leave. Cooper was told to expect an answer shortly and the Prime Minister was to try to delay Kosygin's departure. Still, no answer came. Cooper tried one last ditch attempt to get an answer out of the White House. To prove that he was not lying when he said Kosygin was about to leave, Cooper took drastic action: 'In utter desperation ... I dangled the telephone as far out of the window as I could get it so that he could hear the sound of the roaring motors.'[203]

Rostow then told Cooper that Wilson should inform Kosygin that an important message may come through after he had returned to Claridge's. At this point, the American and British delegations thought they were 'in the clover. Wilson came up, Brown came up; there was a lot of hooch. And it was great -- we thought we'd really pulled a rabbit out of the hat'.[204]

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202 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 464

203 Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 365

204 Oral History Interview, Cooper, Interview III, p. 29

Once back at Downing Street, a message came through from the President to the Prime Minister. The Americans had agreed that they would not resume the bombing of North Vietnam, if before 10 a.m. Monday morning (British time) the North Vietnamese had given an assurance (directly or through the Russians) that they would stop the movement of troops and supplies into South Vietnam from that time.[205] As Cooper said,

> It was an impossible deadline. Wilson would have to discuss the proposition with Kosygin, Kosygin would have to send the message to Hanoi, Hanoi would have to consider it and then transmit a reply. It seemed inconceivable, however efficient and well-intentioned all parties involved were, that a response could be received within the ten hours at our disposal.[206]

By the time Wilson had received the message, had the proposal typed up on Downing Street paper, and got over to Claridge's to deliver it to Kosygin, it was 1.00 am and so in effect there were only nine hours in which to respond.

Wilson later reflected that Johnson's decision seemed almost for domestic consumption. In order to justify the imminent resumption of bombing, the President stressed that the Phase A-Phase B offer had been outstanding for three months and there had as yet been no reply, and reminded the Prime Minister that as President he had responsibilities to US troops, South Vietnam and to the allies. As if to soften the blow, Johnson engaged in diplomatic flattery:

> Nevertheless, you have worked nobly this week to bring about what all humanity wants: A decisive move towards peace. It is an effort that will be long remembered. I feel a responsibility to give you this further chance to make that effort bear fruit. We

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205 US Formula, 12 February 1967, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Marigold-Sunflower, Box 9, LBJL

206 Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 366

> will go more than half way. I am prepared to go the last mile in this week's particular effort; although none of us can regard a failure tonight as the end of the road.[207]

Cooper immediately got on the phone to Rostow to complain about the tightness of the deadline. Rostow was 'by no means friendly' and commented to the effect that 'we've had about enough out of you guy'.[208] At the same time, Wilson raced over to Claridge's to pass the message on to Kosygin. Not surprisingly, the Russian premier was alarmed at the American ultimatum. After a few minutes of arguing about the nature of the message and the unreasonable deadline, Kosygin said he would pass the message on to Moscow to pass to Hanoi. According to Wilson, Kosygin had begun writing the draft in his presence. American intelligence confirmed that Kosygin had indeed transmitted the proposal via Moscow almost as soon as Wilson left. Wilson also told Kosygin that he would request more time from the Americans and indeed on returning to Downing Street he cabled a request that the bombing suspension be extended for a further 24 hours. After 'an awful lot of expenditure of energy' from the Americans and British in London, Washington relented and added an extra six hours to the deadline to 1600 hours (London time). The President informed the Prime Minister of this news and again stressed that,

> in making this decision I bore in mind Moscow's and Hanoi's problems of transmittal two ways. But I also was conscious of the fact that they have had the possibility of responding to essentially this message for the 3 months since we gave it to the Poles and you gave it to the Russians; and the 5 days since it was transmitted direct to Hanoi and also given by you to Kosygin.... If there is any interest in some such A-B proposition, there had – and still is – been ample time for them either to agree or come back with a counter-proposal.

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207 Telegram from President to Prime Minister, 13 Feb 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 467

208 Transcript, Chester Coopr Oral History Interview by Paige E. Mulholland, 7 August 1967, Interview III, p. 29

Johnson acknowledged Wilson's 'gallant last minute effort'.[209] The discussions in Washington regarding these additional few hours are particularly revelatory. Wilson was correct in his assessment of the hawks and doves. McNamara was against extending the deadline, arguing that Wilson had already had two bombing extensions and that to 'give them' a third was volunteering something for no obvious reason. Vice-President, Hubert Humphrey, disagreed with the 'hawks' believing it was worth the risk because this was the first time the Soviets had 'been in like this'.[210] It was also acknowledged that any short-time extension was in fact a political decision, and that a few hours difference would not make much difference militarily. Bundy felt that the US had 'gone more notches'. Rostow believed there was 'danger' in the Russians coming back with something concrete.[211] That is, what if the Russians came back with a 'modified' no from Hanoi. Would the US be put in a position of having to compromise its position further?

On their way to Gatwick airport where Kosygin was due to depart for Moscow at 11.15 am, the Russian Premier informed Wilson that he had passed on the message to Hanoi. Wilson told him of the six hours extension but Kosygin was not impressed. There was no official reply from Hanoi by 4.00 pm (London time) and a few hours later bombing restarted. Hanoi Radio did, however, broadcast a reply to a message to Ho Chi Minh from Pope Paul VI expressing the hope for an early peaceful solution to the war in Vietnam. The reply came just 30 minutes before

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209 Telegram from Walt Rostow to Bruce, 13 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*

210 Tom Johnson's Notes of Meeting, Box 1, Set II, February 13 1967, Meeting on Vietnam, LBJL

211 Telegram from Katzenbach to American Embassy London & Moscow, 13 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*

the end of the US deadline and as usual castigated US imperialists and demanded an end to their aggression.[212]

By the time Kosygin left London, Anglo-American relations were in a parlous state. Not surprisingly, a post-mortem was necessary to discover what went wrong and why.

Aftermath

The immediate concern in the days after the Kosygin visit was for secrecy. By early on 13 February the Press on both sides of the Atlantic were running speculative news stories on the reasons behind the bombing extension. Not surprisingly, Kosygin's presence in London led journalists to link the two events but the extension of the bombing pause was explained as being connected to Kosygin's presence in London and no other reason. The Americans were once more worried that the Wilson government might not keep quiet. For a number of reasons, the peace proposals had to be kept secret. The Americans stressed to their ambassadors in Britain and the Soviet Union that the 'British must realize that [the] Soviets went out on a very long limb, and that any exposure of [the] serious discussions in fact carried on could do serious and indeed irreparable harm to future Soviet role'.[213] The State Department added that 'it goes without saying that British silence is imperative whatever they think of [the] positions we put forward or [the] timing of our resumption'.[214]

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212 Telegram from Katzenbach to American Embassy Saigon, TS/Nodis, Sent 2258, 13 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*

213 Ibid

214 Telegram Katzenbach to American Embassy London & Moscow, 13 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*

They were right to be worried. Wilson was not yet able to contain his anger and disappointment at the failure to establish talks. On 13 February he addressed the House of Commons on the Kosygin visit.[215] The following day he faced questions in the House and clarified the previous day's comments.[216] He said he believed there were moments when the conditions to secure a peace settlement 'could have been very near'.[217] He also revealed that there had been a plan to end the war, saying

> there is an initiative, there is a plan – that I can't tell the House about – which could bring peace tomorrow and requires a very, very small movement to activate all the complicated machinery which would bring us to peace negotiations.[218]

He explained the failure to secure such a plan in terms of a lack of trust and confidence on the part of both the Americans and the North Vietnamese in relation to one another. He did, however, place particular emphasis on the activities of North Vietnamese troops during the Tet truce. This criticism drew a sharp response from Wilson's left-wing opponents. They demanded to know who had provided information on the southward movement of North Vietnamese troops and supplies. When the Prime Minister refused to reveal his sources, cries of 'Was it the Americans?' were heard. As the *New York Times* commented, this implied Washington could not be trusted.[219] On the resumption of bombing, nearly 50 Labour MPs signed a telegram to President Johnson deploring his decision.[220] Shortly afterwards 100 MPs signed a petition condemning the renewal of bombing.

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215 Hansard, 13 February 1967, Vol. 741, Col. 109

216 Ibid, 14 February 1967, Vol. 741, Col. 345-354

217 Hansard, 14 February 1967, Vol. 741, Col.. 350; *New York Times*, Wednesday 15 February 1967, p. 1

218 Ibid

219 Hansard. 14 February 1967, c. 351 & *New York Times*, Wednesday 15 February 1967, p. 4

220 *The Times*, February 14 1967, p. 1

Despite Wilson's comments being interpreted in his own country as pro-American, Washington felt, with some justification, that Wilson was in fact referring unfavourably to American intransigence when he spoke of the need for 'a very, very small movement' to bring about peace. Journalists and MPs were intrigued by Wilson's comments on machinery and plans. Wilson also made a ministerial broadcast on television on the evening of 14 February in which he repeated that peace in Vietnam 'was almost within our grasp' at the weekend. He explained that 'one single act of trust could have achieved it'. [221]

Wilson's statements caused much annoyance in Washington. Kaiser at the American Embassy in London met with Michael Palliser on 17 February to voice the Administration's 'gravest concern'. Kaiser told Palliser that the telegram instructing him to speak on this issue 'had been couched in very tough language indeed'.[222] The suggestion that peace was 'very near' and that there was a 'secret plan' upset Washington for two reasons. First, the Johnson administration did not believe such comments were accurate as Hanoi had not shown the slightest interest in this or other approaches to them. Second, 'whatever the facts' such public discussions put the Americans 'on the spot' with their allies and was causing them 'considerable embarrassment at home'.[223]

> In the United States it encouraged the 'doves' to step up pressure on the Administration to stop the bombing, and generally to get out of the war; while it brought all the 'hawks' circling in with cries of outrage at the prospect of a negotiation and demands for a full revelation of what the Administration was up to. The whole debate became thereby

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221 *New York Times*, Wednesday 15 February 1967, p. 1

222 OW/MP Minute on Anglo American Relations over Vietnam, 17 February 1967, PREM 13/1918

223 Telegram from Kaiser to Rusk, 17 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*; OW/MP Minute on Anglo American Relations over Vietnam, 17 February 1967, PREM 13/1918, PRO

> impassioned and the President's task of steering a judicious middle course – already appallingly difficult – was made even more so. Moreover, your remarks had caused the Ambassadors of all America's allies in the war … to ask in peremptory fashion what the US Government was doing behind their backs.[224]

Palliser defended the British position. He understood the US anxiety on this issue but felt the Prime Minister would have found it difficult 'to make so effective a case for the US and British positions without saying the things he did in public.' He also pointed out that the Prime Minister's 'backgrounder' to the newspaper correspondents on Monday evening had helped to secure positive press coverage for the US on Tuesday.[225]

Palliser told Kaiser – and later reported back to Wilson - that in his opinion

> however inconvenient this fact might be for the Administration, they must accept that the British Government could not best help them simply by an absolute toeing of the American line; the political pressures were too strong for this, even if it otherwise seemed right, which in present circumstances I thought it did not.[226]

Palliser also made it clear that the tone of the Prime Minister's instructions had also been very firm and he was to leave Kaiser 'in no doubt of the strength' of Wilson's 'feelings about the conduct of last week's affairs and of your dis-satisfaction at the way in which virtually three days had been lost through what seemed, on the most charitable interpretation, inexplicable muddle and confusion'. Palliser then reassured Kaiser that the Prime Minister had no intention of embarrassing the President but

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224 OW/MP Minute on Anglo American Relations over Vietnam, Secret, 17 February 1967, PREM 13/1918, PRO

225 Telegram from Kaiser to Rusk, 17 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 481

226 Palliser to Prime Minister, 17 February 1967, PREM 13/1918, 'Anglo-American Relations over Vietnam'

'there could of course be no question' of the Prime Minister retracting anything he had already said. The Prime Minister endorsed Palliser's comments in private.[227]

Kaiser reported back to Rusk that,

> while Palliser was obviously genuine in expressing his understanding of the nature of our problems, he also made it clear that the PM was more bullish about the significance of last week than we were. Palliser stressed on several occasions the 'dramatic' change in Kosygin's attitude in contrast to last July when the PM visited Moscow and even as late as November when Brown was there .... It is also the firm conviction of the British that Kosygin did transmit our last proposal to Hanoi and very possibly with the recommendations that 'they give it serious consideration.'[228]

London and Washington therefore interpreted the actions of the Russians and North Vietnamese differently. Palliser argued that rather than taking such a negative stance on any public discussions of the possibilities for peace, it might be desirable to allow a 'ray of hope to pierce the otherwise gloomy scene'.[229] Moreover, the British had to stress their own major political problem over Vietnam.

It was now clear that the Kosygin episode required delicate handling if a full-blown rift was not to develop. The British could not easily forget the events that occurred during Kosygin's visit. The Prime Minister, in particular, was not able to move on; relations with the Johnson administration had been irrevocably damaged. The Prime Minister suggested he visit Washington to discuss matters personally with the President. Over a month later, Kaiser was still reporting back to Washington that it was 'apparent that Wilson and Brown do a lot of churning over the Kosygin visit

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227 Palliser to Prime Minister, 17 February

228 Telegram from Kaiser to Rusk, 17 February 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*, p. 481

229 Palliser to Prime Minister, Secret, 17 February 1967, 'Anglo-American Relations over Vietnam', PREM 13/1918, PRO

and may still have some scars from our having given the Phase A/Phase B formula to the Poles in November without telling Brown'.[230]

Walt Rostow was despatched later in the month to try to smooth over the difficulties caused by the breakdown in communications between the transatlantic partners. Given his prominent role in events, however, he was probably not the most appropriate person to smooth the waters. He was also of the opinion that in many ways the Americans had been too co-operative with Wilson, considering the Prime Minister had explored the A-B formula verbally on his own. [231] Prior to the meeting, Rostow had been informed by Palliser that the Prime Minister would 'wish to explore pretty firmly … the apparent inconsistencies and fumblings during the Kosygin visit'.[232] Rostow said that he would welcome the chance to discuss this. He also reported that the President had wanted to support Wilson throughout the Kosygin visit because he believed in the sincerity of the Prime Minister's hopes for the peace not because he believed there would be a successful outcome.

> Indeed, the President was coming increasingly to feel that mediation in the conflict, whether between the United States and North Vietnam, or between the United States and the Soviet Union (acting as agent for North Vietnam) was becoming counter-productive.

Not only was there little sight that Hanoi was interested in negotiating, but the various mediation efforts 'tended to create confusion and misunderstanding amongst world opinion'.[233] Bill Jordan, a Senior Staff Member of the National Security

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230 Telegram from Kaiser to Rusk, 21 March 1967 in Herring, *Secret Diplomacy*

231 Top Secret, Rept. by Walt Rostow on 'The Essence of the Breakdown in Communications', NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Marigold-Sunflower, Box 9, LBJ

232 Extract from a Minute from M. Palliser to Prime Minister, 23 February 1967, PREM 13/1918, PRO

233 Ibid

Council also told Rostow, that if Wilson returned to his idea of coming to Washington, then he knew how to handle it.[234] This meant, 'not now Harold'.

On 25 February Rostow met with the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. He reported back to Rusk and Johnson that he began the two-hour meeting by expressing US appreciation for British efforts during the Kosygin visit. However, it soon became clear to Rostow that, as expected, 'the main point of his interview with me was to get off his chest his frustrations with the week with Kosygin'. Wilson argued that there had been a 'breakdown in communications', that the Americans hadn't objected to his formulation of the Phase A-Phase B formula on Tuesday but then 'overtook' his Friday proposal. He also felt that the 'final effort to redress the situation inevitably assumed the form of an ultimatum'. Wilson was adamant that the problem of communication had to be cleared up.

Rostow did not argue with Wilson in any real sense, except to say that Washington had not expected the message to be delivered on Friday until the Prime Minister had heard from the Americans. As Rostow put it, 'I let him use my presence to unload his feelings rather than put them on paper to Washington'.[235] Rostow commented that 'beneath it all was a rankling that we did not cut him in fully on the direct channel'.[236] While Wilson agreed with Rostow that Hanoi appeared to regard negotiations as 'defeat', he stressed that the importance of Kosygin's visit was that this was the first time the Soviets had been 'ready to move'.[237] Rostow summarised Wilson's position.

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234 Telegram from Bill Jorden to Walt Rostow, AmEmbassy, London, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210, File: UKI, Vol. X, Memos, 1/67-4/67, LBJL

235 Telegram from Walt Rostow, AmEmbassy, London to President/Rusk 25 February 1967, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Marigold-Sunflower, Box 9, LBJL

236 Ibid

237 Ibid

> His problem with Viet-Nam is clear: he has a quite strong anti-Viet-Nam wing in the Labor Party; bombing the North is more widely unpopular in Britain; and Wilson feels he must keep moving in a peace posture or the basis for over-all support of the U.S. position will slip away from him. We shall be hearing from him about his problems with 'escalation', I would guess.[238]

Rostow told the President that he left 'pretty indelibly' three points. First, that the President had responsibilities to over 500,000 US servicemen and to 'our fighting allies'. Second, that there was a danger to the Johnson administration's political base at home from pursuing peace moves that failed. And finally, that there was also a danger from 'panmunjom-type' negotiations, that is in engaging in pointless talk for talk's sake, if the other side was not interested in ending the war by non-military means and US soldiers were dying the meantime.[239]

The British record of this meeting paints a somewhat different picture.[240] Wilson's forthright comments conveyed his continuing anger over the events during Kosygin's visit. He addressed numerous British concerns including the failure of Washington to fully brief them over the Polish affair, the fact that despite Cooper's presence during the Kosygin talks and the 'wise advice' of Ambassador Bruce, the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary had faced the embarrassment of having to withdraw a proposal on 10 February in order to substitute a 'more restrictive' one. This had led to the waste of two days' time and the final US offer had been viewed by Mr. Kosgyin 'with some justification' as an ultimatum. Rostow, according to this

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238 Ibid

239 Ibid. Talks to end the Korean war began in July 1951 at the village of Panmunjom. Talks dragged on for two years until an armistice agreement was signed on 27 July 1953.

240 Secret. Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and Mr. Walt W. Rostow at No. 10 Downing Street at 5.30 pm on Friday, 24 February 1967, PREM 13/1918, PRO

record, said although he was grateful for Wilson's frankness, 'he was inclined to question the extent of misunderstanding or breakdown in communications suggested by the Prime Minister' and 'in any case President Johnson was becoming increasingly sceptical of the possibilities of effective mediation' and felt the 'best prospect for the future might well lie more in direct contacts' with Hanoi. Rostow thought that opinion in Washington 'was now fairly firm that progress by mutual de-escalation was unlikely and that they would have to concentrate on "looking towards the end of the road"'. [241] This comment infuriated Wilson who saw it as affirmation that,

> he and the Foreign Secretary had been allowed to discuss the problem with Mr. Kosygin on a somewhat false premise – since all the propositions they had put to Kosygin with the approval and encouragement, as they understood it, of the U.S. Government, had hinged around the prospect of mutual de-escalation. If this was not to be the American policy he found it difficult to see why he had not been told so before.[242]

Rostow vehemently denied that Washington had been insincere on this point. He did, however, go on to explain in detail Johnson's main concerns over his Presidency. Internally, the war on poverty and the struggle for black civil rights dominated his objectives; externally, resistance to aggression in Vietnam was his main consideration. He explained that the President was aware that neither of his campaigns 'was likely to yield an early dividend of political popularity; and he was facing up realistically to the possibility of a defeat in the 1968 election. However, believing he could still win, the President 'recognised that his handling of the

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241 Ibid
242 Ibid

Vietnam war could be a crucial factor'. To illustrate his point, Rostow referred to a recent *Newsweek* article by Louis Harris which had summarised the latest opinion polls.

> The President had been struck, because he had independently reached the same conclusion himself, by a point made in this article that whenever the American peoples' hopes for a quick end to the war were aroused, only to be dashed shortly afterwards, the President's personal popularity fell heavily. The President had concluded that, if he were to handle the war in such a way as to retain the confidence of the middle of the road majority of American opinion, his public position had to achieve a balance between readiness to negotiate and determination to prosecute the war with firmness but moderation.[243]

Wilson commented that although he supported Johnson personally and understood his preoccupation with Vietnam, too much reliance should not be placed on such polls, 'they tended to fluctuate; and in any case a Government had to base its policies on something more solid than the polls'.[244] To illustrate his point, he said that even though a majority of the British public opposed the war in Vietnam and the British government's support for the Americans, there would be no change of policy on their part. He did, however, expect domestic pressure to increase if the hawks in Washington had their way and the war was further intensified.

Wilson said that 'he could not conceal … that during the weekend February 11/12 he had been gravely concerned about the future relationship between London and Washington'. He thought that this should have been made clear from his messages to Washington and Bruce's reports, and would have been even more

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[243] Ibid
[244] Ibid

apparent had he not refrained from sending a third message that he had drafted. He also admitted that the present meeting had done little to reassure him. He than reminded Rostow that

> on a previous occasion, where there had been a similar and apparently major failure of communications between London and Washington, President Kennedy had arranged for a detailed inquiry to be made.

He was talking about the 1962 Skybolt affair, but Rostow was 'non-committal' on the idea of an investigation. This unsubtle hint did, however, indicate how seriously Wilson viewed events. Wilson then pressed for another meeting with the President 'fairly soon'. Rostow said that he had been instructed to invite Mr. Wilson to Washington after his visit in June to 'Expo 67' in Canada. Wilson said he would have preferred an earlier meeting but understood the timetabling difficulties.

The meeting with Rostow had done little to heal the wounds. And, as the US further escalated the war, British domestic difficulties did indeed increase. The British public and press continued to turn against the war. As a consequence, the British government asked Rusk if a prominent American, possibly Vice-President Humphrey or Ambassador Goldberg, might visit the United Kingdom to help fight the propaganda battle.[245] It was proposed that any US delegation could come under the cover of other business, and then present the US case before small groups of journalists, politicians and academics. Although the US was at first worried that the British request and subterfuge might come to light, and therefore the impact of such a visit be substantially weakened, Rusk eventually agreed that Bill Bundy could visit

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245 Telegram from Rusk to Bruce, 13 March 1967, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210, File; UK, Vol. X, Cables, 1/67-4/67, LBJL

later in the month. It was even suggested that perhaps the Under-Secretary Ball and Rusk himself might stop over in London early in April. Bundy visited London between 20-22 March and 'completed … the most effective and useful job of expounding' American policy in Vietnam. He met with MPs, newspapers editors and journalists, the Foreign Secretary and other Foreign Office officials, trade union leaders and the head of BBC public affairs. Kaiser reported back to Rusk that Bundy had done 'a superb job … he has been candid, eloquent, and persuasive. I am sure that he has shaken a lot of the critics and persuaded a lot of the doubtful'. The British were 'extremely pleased' with Bundy's performance. [246]

Another visitor was Hubert Humphrey, who saw Wilson at Chequers on Sunday 2 April on his way back from a tour of Europe. After dinner, the Prime Minister raised the issue of Vietnam.[247] Wilson continued to worry the Americans, especially as he told Humphrey that

> he thought the key to peace lay through the Soviet Union and the key to the Soviet Union lay with Britain. He felt that he had a real opportunity to act as middleman between the US and USSR to reach a negotiated settlement. In fact, he had been considering the possibility of moving more toward the middle, between the two nations, on Vietnamese policy. If he did this, he wanted us to understand that he was doing so in the interests of peace and not because of any lack of friendship or loyalty to the US.

Not surprisingly, Humphrey said that this change by Wilson would be misunderstood in the United States and that 'it might result in increased pressure from 'hawks' for unilateral and strong US action to crush North Vietnam'.[248] He also warned Wilson

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246 Ibid

247 Cable from the Vice President to the President and the Secretary, 4 April 1967, David Bruce diaries

248 Ibid

that any change in the UK's position 'would jeopardize his relationship with the President' and he should therefore think carefully about it.[249]

In the meantime, the diplomatic arguments over the Kosygin visit continued at the highest level. Wilson continued to pursue the matter via a stream of cables to the President. He was encouraged in this by the publication of President Johnson's exchanges with Ho Chi Minh.[250] By early April, however, Patrick Dean, the British Ambassador in Washington, felt the matter should not be pushed further as it was unlikely to pay dividends.[251]

Long-term Impact of Sunflower

A number of questions were raised by the failure of the Wilson-Kosygin initiative. Did Wilson exaggerate how 'close' they came to peace? In his memoirs Wilson wrote that 'a historic opportunity had been missed'.[252] He also said this during a television interview some two years after the event: 'I believe, we got very near … then the whole thing was dashed away'. He believed that a further 48-hour suspension of the bombing might have been crucial in encouraging a response from Hanoi.[253] This judgement is difficult to argue with; an extension *might* have been crucial. As we have seen, there are several reasons to believe the Soviets were willing to play the role of mediators. However, there were clear limits on how far they would go in this respect. Moscow wanted peace in Vietnam but not at the risk

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249 Ibid

250 Note from Michael Palliser to Prime Minister, Secret, President Johnson's Exchanges with Ho, 23 March 1967, PREM 13/1919, PRO

251 Memo from Walt Rostow to the President, 7 April 1967, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Marigold-Sunflower, Box 9, LBJL

252 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 468

253 *Washington Post*, 29 July 1969 in Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, p. 367

of being portrayed as a tool of the US. It is much more difficult to ascertain whether Hanoi was receptive to Soviet mediation and/or the proposal. The National Security Agency reported that on 13 February the North Vietnamese transmitted two messages from Hanoi to Moscow. It is however highly unlikely that Hanoi would have accepted the amended Phase A-Phase B proposal due to its conditional nature. What is important here, however, is the fact that Wilson 'felt' that Washington had bungled a unique opportunity. and had made the British, and more particularly himself, look foolish into the bargain.

If it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the potential efficacy of the Phase A-Phase B proposal as a catalyst for peace, what does the Wilson-Kosygin episode tell us about Anglo-American relations by early 1967? The most obvious conclusion is that relations at the highest levels were nowhere near as intimate as Wilson liked to claim or, indeed, believed. Johnson admitted that although he was in touch with Wilson by cable and via third parties, he did not speak to Wilson on the telephone at any point during the Wilson-Kosygin talks.[254] And as William Bundy argued, the failure of this peace initiative had 'great significance as a source of lasting distrust and feeling of misunderstanding on both sides, between the President and Wilson. If they were not too well off before, they were infinitely worse after this'.[255]

Prime Minister's Visit to Washington, 1-3 June 1967

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254 Confidential Memo from Walt Rostow to the President, 3 March 1967, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 210, File: UK, Vol. X Memos, 1/67-4/67, LBJL

255 Transcript, William Bundy Oral History Interview, Tape 4, 2/6/69 by Paige E. Mulhollan, p. 27, LBJL

The fiasco of the Wilson-Kosygin peace initiative was soon overshadowed as Anglo-American relations came under further strain in more fundamental ways. By November 1967 the pound sterling was devalued and just two months later the Wilson government announced Britain's withdrawal East of Suez.

In June 1967 Wilson's visited Washington again. Although the fallout from the Kosygin visit overshadowed proceedings, this did not prevent Wilson from being 'formally' received, including a welcoming ceremony with military honours. This led one of Wilson's critics, Tony Benn to describe the Prime Minister as being received 'with all the trumpets appropriate for a weak foreign head of state who has to be buttered up so that he can carry the can for American foreign policy'.[256]

Although this trip was largely concerned with Britain's role East of Suez, Wilson remained preoccupied with Vietnam due to increasingly vociferous attacks on his government's still broadly pro-American policy on that issue. By this stage, Wilson main's concern was over the possibility that the US might escalate the war even further, and perhaps even invade the North. In April, Johnson had authorised bombing raids against power transformers, ammunition dumps and other targets near Hanoi and Haiphong. And, as many outside of Washington suspected, Walt Rostow was now advocating a full-scale invasion of the North. Johnson had taken a middle course between the advocates of increased air action and those who argued for a reduction in the bombing to the South only. Instead, the President ordered a halt to air attacks on targets within ten miles of Hanoi.

When Wilson met with Johnson on the morning of 2 June the President categorically denied the rumours of an invasion. The Prime Minister was reassured

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256 *Tony Benn Diaries*, 1 June 1967, p. 501

to hear this, quoting Kosygin on the dangers of Chinese intervention should America go this far. Johnson said he was well aware of this risk and had no intention of courting a third world war by invading the North. [257] Little more of substance was said on Vietnam, apart from Wilson repetition of his belief that there had been 'a serious failure of communication between the British and American Government' and that the Soviets had claimed to have been in touch with Hanoi.[258] Johnson repeated that neither Kosygin nor Gromyko had 'delivered' the North Vietnamese, and doubted they ever had the power to do so. The Prime Minister said the lesson to be learnt 'appeared to be that, if any other chance of establishing contact with Hanoi occurred, the American Government should deal direct with the Soviet Government or invoke our [British] assistance rather than using Poles, Hungarians or other unreliable intermediaries'.[259] Ironically, Wilson still saw himself as a possible honest broker.[260]

Devaluation of the Pound – November 1967

Having still not recovered from the Kosygin episode and British talks of dissociation, Anglo-American relations faced another crisis point in November of 1967. Sterling was in trouble again but this time the Americans were not prepared to bail it out. On 8 November the Governor of the Bank of England informed the

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257 Record of Conversation between the Prime Minister and the President of the United States of America at the White House on the Morning of Friday, 2nd June, 1967, Confidential Annex, Visit of the Prime Minister to Canada and the United States, 1-3 June 1967, PREM 13/1919, PRO

258 Record of a Meeting between the Prime Minister and Hi s Advisers and the President of the united States and His Adviers at the White House at 1 pm on Friday 2nd June 1967, PREM 13/1906, PRO

259 Ibid

260 Record of Conversation between the Prime Minister and the President of the United States of America at the White House on the Morning of Friday, 2nd June, 1967, Confidential Annex, Visit of the Prime Minister to Canada and the United States, 1-3 June 1967, PREM 13/1919, PRO

Americans that massive US financial help was required to save the pound. Although both James Callaghan and Roy Jenkins were resigned to devaluation, Wilson still believed he could rescue the situation with another trip to Washington and a personal appeal to the President. He could now play hardball with Johnson, arguing that if Britain didn't receive financial assistance to help the pound, he would have to withdraw British forces from East of Suez immediately. When Wilson suggested via David Bruce that he should visit the President two days later, however he had little choice but to mask the real reason for his visit, instead saying he wanted to discuss Vietnam, amongst other things.[261]

While sterling was uppermost in Wilson's mind, the Vietnam excuse was not entirely fabrication. The Labour Government's difficulties went from bad to worse. At the Labour Party Conference in Scarborough 2-6 October, the Government was defeated on a resolution on Vietnam.[262] Wilson personally felt the brunt of the growing opposition to the Vietnam war at the end of October when he was in Cambridge to speaking to a Labour party meeting. His car was stopped by egg-throwing and chanting anti-war demonstrators and badly damaged. Wilson and his wife Mary were jostled and manhandled by the crowd and a policeman was seriously injured.[263] On 8 November, Wilson had met with a Parliamentary Labour Party that was extremely angry over Vietnam, particularly the government's failure to dissociate itself from the latest waves of bombing of civilian parts of Hanoi and Haiphong.

Bruce told Rusk, acting on material from an important Labour Party informant, that

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261 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 574

262 Report of the 66th Annual Conference of the Labour Party, Scarborough, 2-6 October 1967, Transport House, Smith Square, London, SW1

263 Wilson, *Labour Government*, p. 567

the opposition to the Prime Minister's policy on Vietnam now came from all sections of the Party, including the right and centre.[264]

Johnson, however, was not prepared to receive Wilson on this pretext lest there be yet more speculation regarding possible peace moves or further rifts between Britain and America on the subject. Instead, Sir Patrick Dean, the British Ambassador delivered Wilson's appeal for financial help. By 13 November, the Americans had replied in the negative, as Wilson put it 'with reluctance they would have to see us go down'.[265] Despite some last minutes signs that Washington was wavering, on 15 November it was recognised that there were 'no serious signs of a cheque book' from the Americans. The decision to devalue was then taken. On 18 November the pound sterling was devalued from $2.80 to $2.40. Although a substantial devaluation, the Americans correctly judged that it was not large enough to have a serious impact on the dollar.

Although prepared to offer limited financial aid, Washington was now prepared to 'think the unthinkable'. It had its own financial problems. The Vietnam war was costing $20 billion per year by 1967 and the budget deficit had reach $10 billion for that fiscal year.[266] To help deal with this burden, Johnson had reluctantly acknowledged that Americans couldn't afford guns *and* butter, and had introduced a 10 percent surcharge on individual and corporate taxes. This contributed to Johnson's difficulties in securing favourable public opinion. Those regarding the commitment to Vietnam as a 'mistake' rose to 46%.[267] Johnson's own popularity rating decreased as the anti-war movement continued to grow in numbers and public

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264 Cable from Bruce to Rusk, 8 November 1967 in David Bruce diaries

265 Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, p. 481

266 Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 502 & Young, *Vietnam Wars*, p. 207

267 Ibid

visibility. As well as continuing Congressional pressure, elements of the media also began to question US involvement in Vietnam, mostly noticeably *Life* magazine whose editor, Hedley Donovan, argued the conflict was no longer 'worth winning'.[268] Even worse, as far as Johnson was concerned, there was increasing dissent within his own cabinet. Robert McNamara increasingly questioned the validity of American's military campaign, particularly the effectiveness of bombing North Vietnam. In May McNamara and assistant secretary of defence, John McNaughton challenged NSAM-28 which provided the justification for the American war in Vietnam: 'we seek an independent non-Communist South Vietnam'. They argued that US war aims should be more limited: 'only to see that the people of South Vietnam are permitted to determine their own future'. Johnson and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were outraged at the proposed softening in America's position. The President believed McNamara had turned 'dovish' on him and, by November he had been appointed President of the World Bank.[269]

The East of Suez Decision – January 1968

After devaluation came the most damaging blow to the 'special relationship'. On 10 January 1968, George Brown met with Dean Rusk and informed him that on Tuesday, 16 January, Her Majesty's Government would announce its plans to withdraw all forces from the Far East by 31 March 1971 (except Hong Kong) and to withdraw all forces from the Persian Gulf by the same date.[270] The decision was

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268 Karnow, *Vietnam*, p. 503

269 Young, *Vietnam Wars*, pp. 207-8

270 Meeting between Secretary Rusk and Foreign Secretary Brown, 12 January 1968, David Bruce Diaries, Mss5:1 B8303:63

made to ensure the success of the devaluation of the pound. Although Brown admitted that the decision had for all practical purposes been made, it still had to be confirmed by the Cabinet on 12 January and he said he would report the views of the US Government. Rusk engaged in some last minute statescraft, using both emotive and strategic arguments to try to influence the British.

Rusk's entreaties were quickly followed by a last-minute personal appeal from the President. Johnson flattered Wilson for his courage in bearing the financial burdens so far but continued

> I cannot conceal from you my deep dismay upon learning this profoundly discouraging news. If these steps are taken, they will be tantamount to British withdrawal from world affairs, with all that means for the future safety and health of the free world. The structure of peacekeeping will be shaken to its foundations. Our own capability and political will could be gravely weakened if we have to man the ramparts alone.[271]

He urged Wilson and his colleagues to review the alternatives before taking such 'irrevocable steps'. Johnson knew, however, that his efforts were futile. The announcement to withdraw East of Suez was made as part of a statement on sizeable budget cuts in government spending on 16 January 1968 and was endorsed by the Cabinet and Parliament. The military cuts resulted in a reduction of 75,000 military personnel and 80,000 civilians. Britain also cancelled its order for 50 US F-111 long-range reconnaissance aircraft, the F-111s. As the CIA put it: 'By making such defence cuts, Britain has underlined the fact that it now considers itself a European rather than a world power'.[272] British newspapers were quick to recognise that the

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271 Cable from President to Prime Minister, 12 January 1968, David Bruce diaries, Mss5:1 B8303:63

272 CIA Intelligence Memorandum: Britain Begins Implementation of Budget Cuts, 6 February 1968, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 212, File: UK, Vol. XIII, Memos 1/67-7/69, LBJL

military retrenchment was 'a blow to the Americans, morally if not materially, to the US at a time when its troops were fighting in Asia.' And they speculated that although Johnson probably had 'great sympathy for Wilson's grave dilemma', the US resented the timing and extent of the withdrawal. This was an accurate reading of the situation.

The Times commented on 18 January:

> The basis of Wilson's foreign policy was an understanding with the U.S. that Britain supported American actions in Viet-Nam and maintained troops in the Far East in return for a close relationship with the U.S. and American support for the pound. That world commitment has now been dropped; the one element that remains is British support for the U.S. on Viet-Nam. That support is purely diplomatic and probably hypocritical.[273]

Despite the fact that the war became more unpopular in Britain, Wilson continued his support for the US in Vietnam until he left office.

Wilson's Final Visit to the Johnson White House – 8 February 1968

In early February 1968 Wilson arrived at the Johnson White House for the final time. When the Prime Minister had expressed his desire to see Johnson the previous December for a 'short communication', Johnson had scribbled his response on a memorandum informing him of the requests: 'I'll see Wilson if he can keep shut up about Cuba and Viet Nam.'[274] On his arrival the band played 'The Road to Mandalay'. The Prime Minister masked his embarrassment at this ironic choice of welcoming music by later saying that he liked the tune. It was probably no mistake

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273 *The Times*, 18 January 1968

274 Memorandum from Walt W. Rostow to the President, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 211, File: UK, Vol. XII, Cables, 7-12/67, LBJL

that it was played. The Johnson White House used this visit to reiterate 'distress at the UK's accelerated withdrawal from Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf' and urged in the case of Southeast Asia 'that the UK concert with the countries of the area to promote regional security arrangements prior to the British departure'.[275]

Wilson, still with an eye on his domestic audience, also made comments on Vietnam that must have finally consigned him to the growing ranks of opponents of the war, who Johnson now saw as traitors. In response to up-beat and supportive comments from the President including the phrase 'The American people are backing Britain', Wilson launched into a lengthy speech on Vietnam. The Tet Offensive, a mighty blow to all those who believed the war was being won, had been underway since 31 January. Although couched in ostensibly friendly and supportive language, Wilson warned,

> I have said a hundred times that this problem will never be solved by a military solution, which I see is one of the lessons of the last few days — a determined resistance to see that a military solution is not imposed on the people of Vietnam. [276]

He then talked about calls for 'dissociation' in his own country and explained that he would have done so had he thought it would result in the peace. He had, however, been 'in a position to know a good deal about the history of negotiations and consultations' and these had all resulted in failure. But this did not mean 'we were wrong, all of us here, to try, and to go on trying'.[277] With the President desperately

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275 Memorandum for the President from Rusk, 3 February 1968, Subject: Your Talks with British Prime Minister Harold Wilson on Thursday, February 8, 1968, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 212, File: UK, Vol. XIII, Memos 1/68-7/69, LBJL

276 Exchange of Toasts between the President and the Prime Minister Wilson of Great Britain, 8 February 1968, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 216, File: UK, Visit of PM, 2/7-9/68, LBJL

277 Ibid

trying to rally support for the US redoubled military action in the wake of the Tet setback, Johnson must have found it intolerable to listen to Wilson's final effort to cast himself as a peacebroker.

The End of the Special Relationship?

By May 1967 the US Embassy in Britain judged the 'special relationship' to be 'little more than sentimental terminology'.[278] Rusk agreed with this assessment a year later,

> The special relationship the UK has with us is less important to them now because the British have less interest in maintaining a world role. Operationally, the U.S. and U.K. are working on fewer real problems. The concept of Atlantic cooperation could replace the special relationship. Close bilateral relations with the British, however, will certainly continue.[279]

At the same time Bruce argued that 'Britain's future role is almost surely that of a middle sized though outward looking European power.'[280] He judged that 'while the special US-UK relationship is diminishing, no early dramatic changes are likely, and a substantial relationship will endure based on the practical recognition of mutual interest. Despite everything that had happened over the last few years, Bruce was still wise enough to recognise that,

> It would be a mistake to over react to these changed

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278 Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, 8 May 1967, NSF, Country File, UK, Box 211, File: UK, Vol. XI, Memos, 4/67-6/67, LBJL

279 Summary Notes of the 587th NSC Meeting, 5 June 1968 in NSF, NSC Meetings File, Vol. 5, Tab. 69, 6/5/68, Current Issues Affecting US/UK Relations, LBJL

280 Telegram from Bruce to Rusk, Annual Assessment on Britain, Spring 1968, 1 June 1968, NSF, Country File, Europe & USSR, UK, Vol. XIII, memos, 1/68-7/69, Box 211, LBJL

circumstances and write off the UK as a US ally and a significant force in the world. Even in her reduced circumstances, Britain remains the European power most engaged in world affairs… Britain has, therefore, international prestige and influence which, though diminished, still matter. The fact is, wherever one strikes the balance on this arrangement of tangible and intangible assets, Britain remains the most likeminded and most useful of US allies in world affairs.[281]

By June 1970 both Wilson had left high office, their reputations forever stained by their involvement with Vietnam, and yet the two statesman remained in contact with one another. Their relationship, much like the Anglo-American relationship during this period, was damaged but not destroyed.

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281 Ibid

CONCLUSION

Despite the protracted nature of the tension between the United States and Great Britain over Vietnam, Anglo-American relations survived it, even if by the end of 1968 they were substantially weaker than they had been four years earlier. Transatlantic relations were not, however, unchanged by the disagreements over Vietnam. Disagreements over the war exacerbated the more fundamental problems facing the Anglo-American relationship, most significantly the weakness of sterling and Britain's plan to scale down its worldwide military commitments.

The war's impact on the substance of policy-making between the two countries cannot be denied. Implicitly at least, Vietnam was an underlying factor in negotiations over sterling. While there can be no doubt that the British decision to withdraw from East of Suez was the major factor in explaining the cooling of transatlantic relations, the sheer length of the war, its personal significance to the President, and the war's unpopularity in Britain meant it exacted an obvious toll on Anglo-American relations.

The bi-lateral relationship between the United States and Great Britain was greatly affected by the war in Vietnam. Traditional mutual suspicions of each other in the South East Asian region deepened as the war escalated. Britain felt it was being asked to support an unpopular war without being fully convinced of either the justification for US involvement in Vietnam or the military strategy and tactics employed by the Americans. Moreover, the Labour Government resented not being kept fully informed of events when its support of US policy in Vietnam was so politically sensitive at home. Washington, on the other hand, felt British obligations

under the South East Asian Treaty Organization agreement were being flouted, that the Labour government might withdraw completely from its military role in the Far East, and was not fully confident that Britain would adequately represent US interests during the peace talks.

Consequently, the period 1964-68 saw the United States and Great Britain trying to manage one another over Vietnam. The British continued to attempt to restrain the Americans in the area, believing there were dangers of an American over-reaction to the communist threat in Vietnam. When J.E. Cable became Head of the South East Asia department of the British Foreign Office late in 1963, a new assessment of the situation in Vietnam was made. The SEA department became convinced that a military solution to the Vietnam War was impossible, without risking a confrontation with either the Soviets or the Chinese, and that the US would ultimately face ignominious defeat. As a result, the British government was encouraged to promote peace negotiations on the grounds that a compromise settlement ought to be preferable to the risks involved in escalation. However, the rationale behind this policy was never fully explained to the Americans. Elements within the Foreign Office were either more optimistic about the chances of an outright US victory than their counterparts in the SEA department, or felt it was too risky to jeopardize other areas of close co-operation with the United States by being too honest over Vietnam. As a result, Wilson and his foreign secretaries tended to receive cautious advice from the Foreign Office, as well as from the British Ambassador in Washington, Patrick Dean. Although the British would have loved to have given the Americans the benefit of their wisdom, the time was never right for

the British to give such blunt advice. Whether it would have been heeded in any case, is a moot point.

US decision-making on Vietnam was nevertheless periodically affected by the British. British suggestions of bombing pauses or extensions to them had to be taken seriously by Washington, especially when they were combined with wider international pressure to give Hanoi a chance to respond to peace initiatives. World opinion was important in the propaganda war and as such, the Johnson administration had to appear to be making strenous efforts for a peaceful solution to the Vietnam conflict. It was therefore necessary to ensure that the British stayed in broad support of US policy on Vietnam. The Johnson administration understood Wilson's domestic political difficulties over Vietnam, and made some effort to allow the Prime Minister to portray his relations with the Americans as closer, or at least more significant, than they actually were. For this reason, the British were sometimes informed of US actions in advance, most notably over plans to bomb POL targets in Hanoi and Haiphong. This occasional placation of the British did not mean, however, that the Wilson government was routinely extended this courtesy. Usually, Wilson had to request forcefully that he be briefed on immediate events and on US thinking on Vietnam; the Johnson administration rarely volunteered such intimate consultation. The lack of a British military commitment to Vietnam meant that the Wilson Government was always going to be peripheral to American policy formation for the duration of the conflict.

However, this did not prevent the US using the British as a 'sounding board', often trying ideas out on them during meetings and private discussions. At this level, at least, a degree of co-operation between the nations was preserved. Indeed,

apart from one qualified act of dissociation over the POL bombings, Wilson provided staunch public support for Johnson on Vietnam. He regularly condemned Viet Cong and NLF attacks on the Americans, denounced Hanoi for its intransigence, praised Johnson for his attempts to find peace and his moderation in the military war, and consistently supported US objectives in Vietnam. And for the most part, prior to the 1966 dissociation, the White House recognised that the British Labour Government was providing the firmest verbal support of all its major allies. Still, this was not enough to prove British loyalty, especially to an increasingly embattled and paranoid President who valued this characteristic above all others. The public act of dissociation condemned Wilson to the ranks of other critics in LBJ's mind; he was now a suspicious and unreliable character. As the Prime Minister and his closest advisors suspected, this act of independence severely undermined London's influence in Washington. This may partly explain why, although the US had promised to keep British well informed of events in order that the Wilson government could fully support the Americans, Washington was not always candid with the British. In fact, the US made minimal effort in this area and ultimately used the British. The US deliberately led the British to believe that it was genuine in its support of their peace efforts, only for the charade to be revealed in a humiliating manner during the February 1967 Wilson-Kosygin peace initiative.

This initiative, as with those that came before it, have been too easily judged as 'gimmicks'. This is too harsh an assessment. While the United States and Great Britain never had high hopes that peace would flow directly from these initiatives, both governments were aware that they might help to convey the latest US bargaining position and gain a clearer picture of Moscow's and Hanoi's thinking.

The United States worked hard to maintain British support, especially in public. Although the Johnson administration only occasionally pressed the British directly for material help in Vietnam, privately the desire for a military commitment was ever-present. When it failed to materialise, Britain's reliability as an ally was questioned by many within the US State Department, Congress and the White House. Despite recognizing Wilson's domestic constraints where Vietnam was concerned, Johnson, Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow, all felt that Wilson did not do enough to support the United States in a practical sense and were angered by the British government's attempts to distance itself from American tactics in Vietnam. The President sensed, probably correctly, that the unpopularity of the war in Britain served as a convenient excuse for Harold Wilson's relative detachment from the war effort and immersion in the peace effort. The argument that Britain was over-stretched military also had little validity as far as a token presence in Vietnam was concerned. In Johnson's mind, if Wilson had really believed in the American cause in Vietnam, then surely a token military force would have been manageable politically. This belief was probably confirmed for Johnson after Wilson's parliamentary majority rose substantially in April 1966; the Prime Minister no longer had the excuse that controversy over Vietnam threatened the survival of his government but still no troops were forthcoming.

In the final analysis Vietnam affected Johnson's judgement in most matters and Anglo-American relations were no exception. Lyndon Johnson's personal obsession with the war is starkly apparent in the communications between Great Britain and the United States. The President and his close advisers regularly stressed the personal commitment to the battle, and the domestic ramifications of it,

especially after the July 1965 decision to Americanize the conflict. This personal dimension inevitably led to difficulties in the personal and working relationship between Wilson and Johnson. Given the nature and difficulty of understanding any relationship between human beings - never mind between politicians of such complexity as Wilson and Johnson - it is difficult to comment on the relationship between the two statesmen with any certainty, let alone evaluate its impact on policy decisions. The evidence at times appears contradictory but in many ways it merely reflects the fact that the relationship between the President and the Prime Minister was neither simple nor static, but was multi-dimensional with distinct peaks and troughs. There were periods, usually after one of Wilson's visits to Washington, when the relationship seemed to flourish, but the possibility of a close, working relationship developing into a cordial personal one, ended in July 1966 with Wilson's dissociation decision. The President was convinced that the Prime Minister acted purely out of domestic concerns and firmly believed that Britain had reneged on its SEATO commitments; Wilson was beginning to question LBJ's conduct of the Vietnam war. This incident soured relations and the chances of a meaningful friendship developing were greatly reduced. The debacle surrounding the Wilson-Kosygin peace initiative the following year effectively ended any intimacy between the President and the Prime Minister. Philip Kaiser observed that the relationship between President Johnson and Prime Minister Wilson 'had its ups and downs' and that, at best, they developed a 'shaky rapport.'[1] This appears to be the most accurate assessment of an ambiguous partnership.

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[1] Kaiser, p. 209 & 230

There was no personal chemistry or ideological common ground between Wilson and Johnson. Those who served in both the Kennedy and the Johnson administrations acknowledge that the special relationship lost its emotional charge during the Johnson years. If compared with the earlier relationships between the heads of the US and the UK, say with Roosevelt-Churchill, Eisenhower-Macmillan and Macmillan-Kennedy, and with the later relationships between Reagan and Thatcher, and the one between Clinton and Blair, the Wilson-Johnson relationship was indeed cool. Given Johnson's obsession with Vietnam, it could be argued that any British prime minister who took such unpopular decisions as staying out of Vietnam and devolving Britain's defence role would have had difficulty establishing a close personal relationship with any American President. Moreover, Johnson's own problems of paranoia and self-esteem - his fixation over leaks and his demands for complete loyalty from colleagues and allies - would equally have caused any prime minister problems. And, with Wilson's domestic difficulties over sterling and Vietnam, it is hard to see how he could have done more to ensure a close personal relationship. He could have stayed out of peace negotiations and could have said less on the whole issue of Vietnam, but in so doing would have risked an internal split in his own party. And, while never explicitly linked, Wilson was aware that his diplomatic support on Vietnam helped in negotiations over sterling

So how are we to assess Harold Wilson's performance with regard to both Vietnam and the broader issue of Anglo-American foreign policy of which it was such an integral part? However much Wilson felt humiliated by the Americans' lack of trust and candour, and frustrated by the war, ultimately he survived the balancing act on Vietnam, and managed to avoided devaluation until a more propitious time.

Wilson was a skilful pragmatist, who Johnson and many of his advisers may well have felt got the better of him. Wilson, who suffered castigation at the time - and indeed since - for his support of America's war in Vietnam, has to be given some credit for his skilful handling of persistent US pressure for a deeper British involvement, particularly a token military force. And the Prime Minister did offer more advice and criticism of American tactics in private than many of his critics suspected. The advice was, however, circumspect; the criticism muted. Perhaps, ultimately, Wilson had a failure of courage where Vietnam was concerned. He was probably unwise to have firmly fixed his colours to the Vietnam mast so early on his tenure in office. On coming to office in October of 1964, just one month before the Johnson presidential landslide, the British Prime Minister could have signalled a change in Vietnam policy from his predecessors without necessarily jeopardizing wider relations with the Americans. At this stage, there were no US ground troops in Vietnam, the President had not yet fully committed himself to the fight and Britain could have taken a more neutral stance on the conflict. That is not to deny, however, that the stakes were high; clearly, this would have been a gamble. Johnson was notoriously unpredictable and could have reacted so badly to such an act of perceived disloyalty that he might have taken extreme steps, particularly relating to financial help to Britain, although given the obvious links between sterling and the dollar, America's own vital interests would probably have dictated against such action. What was more likely, and perhaps to Wilson even more frightening, was a public Presidential snub to the British. Johnson may not have received Wilson at the White House so often, and thus jeopardised the image of Britain as a world power whose opinion still counted, and Wilson's own self-image as a statesman whose counsel

mattered. Wilson never considered such an alternative, perhaps unable to contemplate risking such a breach. Instead, he conducted, very skillfully, the balancing act of doing the minimum to keep the Americans on side, but at the same time managing to keep his own backbenchers just about at bay. Nevertheless, Wilson's exaggerated public claims for his role as 'honest broker' meant he faced humiliation at the hands of the Americans. His support for an unpopular and cruel war, left his personal reputation tarnished and the Labour Government's morally suspect.

Of the two equally astute and experienced politicians, Wilson probably came out on top, although the ledger is almost reconciled. Britain's economic situation dictated that eventually sterling had to be devalued and Britain's role East of Suez prematurely ended. Through the 'understandings' reached with the Americans during 1965 Wilson was able to postpone the inevitable, particularly where the defence review was concerned. His achievement was to avoid both decisions until he was in a strong enough domestic position to take them and weather the political fall-out. Wilson was able to exploit doubts about the war within the Johnson administration and within the American nation as a whole. They might not have cared about British opinions but they did desperately need British support for propaganda purposes at least.

Although LBJ and Wilson were central to the debate over Britain and Vietnam, the skills of mediation and the wise guidance of key officials was also vital in preventing a breakdown in the relationship between the President and the Prime Minister. Michael Palliser and Walt Rostow would probably take much of the credit but the fact that disputes on Vietnam did not lead to a lasting breach in Anglo-

American relations is also partly testimony to the decisive role of the two Ambassadors. Both David Bruce in London and Patrick Dean in Washington helped establish the spring 1965 understanding that remained firmly in place until the late summer of 1966, and were generally instrumental in maintaining cordiality and cooperation at most levels of diplomacy. Both men were respected, and their advice heeded, by Johnson and Wilson. They may have helped Wilson achieve something approximating his vision of a 'close' relationship with Americans, for the Wilson/Johnson years could hardly be deemed 'special'.

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